

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢

JANUARY



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!

FEATURE NOVEL

● **THAT DEVIL FROM
CRAZY MOUNTAIN!**

by TOM ROAN

TWO NOVELETTES

● **RED BLOOD ON
THE FUR TRAILS**

by HARRY F. OLMSTED

● **EL LOBO TAKES A TOWN**

by FRED GIPSON

● GULICK ● STEELE ● REEVE

● BLACKBURN ● HEUMAN

● WINDAS ● VAN DEMARK



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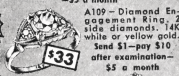
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
ON SALE
JANUARY 8TH

VOLUME XX

JANUARY, 1943

NUMBER 2

1—Complete Novel—1

THAT DEVIL FROM CRAZY MOUNTAIN.....Tom Roan 11

The Crazy Mountain man drank pop and didn't swear, but when the Cold Water hell gang tried to make him say uncle, his old cap-and-ball pistols had a field day making silent dead men out of big, live loudmouths!

2—Feature Novelettes—2

PELTS AND BLOOD FOR WILDERNESS KINGS..Harry F. Olmsted 38

Upon his murdered mother's lonely wilderness grave, sixteen-year-old Tick O'Grain vowed he'd smash his killer daddy's pelt-stealing renegades—or hang on the law's gibbet!

EL LOBO TAKES A TOWN.....Fred Gipson 90

El Lobo, the outlaw from hell, plagued the Border trails, robbing, rustling and slaying, never knowing that when the weird cry of the great gray wolf trumpeted through the wild—he himself would die!

7—Short Stories—7

JUAN POKER'S PILGRIMAGE.....Tom W. Blackburn 31

Padre Chamaco was fearful lest his gold be stolen on the road to Monterrey, but by all that was holy, he figured, he'd rather have the Devil himself as escort than that damn gringo John Poker. . . .

ALL THEIR KINSMEN WERE KILLERS.....Cedric W. Windas 52

Ranchers spun their buxom wives merrily to the warbling flute and whining fiddles, that night in Texas, while out under the cold stars Death, too, was beating out a tune!

THE CITIZENS WANT BLOOD!.....Lloyd Eric Reeve 59

Chris Tovar came home from prison to spend the rest of his life in peace—and found that he had to kill to do it!

WHEN A GUNMAN RODS THE LAW.....William Heuman 67

What out was there left for the Arizona Kid when Fate's roulette wheel tossed him into a fight on the side of the sheriff he had come a thousand miles to kill?

APACHE LUKES' DEATH CACHE.....Gunnison Steele 75

How could Apache Lukes know that as he moved ever nearer to his golden fortune the mackinaw he wore was slowly killing him?

THE BOY WHO TAMED THE BORDER.....Harry Van Demark 79

The citizens of a small Southwestern town sat up and took notice when they got a note saying: "Send two coffins and a doc!"

ONE LITTLE DRINK FOR DIABLO.....Bill Gulick 82

"To hell with love, whiskey and money!" said Juan Ibanez. But when they stole his horse Diablo, that was another matter!

Western Feature

A MARCHING SONG.....The Editor 6

The music in our hearts will spur us on—to victory!

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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A MARCHING SONG

WHEN the going is tough, when it looks as if the greatest effort a man can give will not be enough to win, it's time to sing—and fight a little harder. If you can't sing, whistle; if you can't whistle, beat time with your foot. To America's marching songs, we'll sing our way through the hard months ahead—to victory!

Out on the lonely prairie, over the covered wagon trains, there frequently hovered the shadow of despair. Exhausted almost beyond endurance after grueling weeks on the trail, harried by the thousand and one perils of the wilderness, often short-rationed on food and water, many were the West-bound pioneers who thought of turning back. The comfort and safety of the homes they had left in the East looked pretty attractive to them by comparison. It was mighty hard to keep in mind the high promise of the land they were headed for.

Then at the end of a weary day, when the firewood was gathered and the women folk were cooking supper, one of the company would get out his mouth organ or banjo or guitar and the buoyant strains of *Oh, Susannah* would drift out across the prairie night. Someone would take up the words. Soon, around the cookfires, women would be humming at their tasks; men tending the horses would pick it up; those busy readying the wagons for the next day's trek would go about their work a little more enthusiastically as they joined in with "Don't you cry for me. . ."

Then they would all be singing by the time it got to the second "I'm off to California with my banjo on my knee." Bracing as the stew in the cookpots, would be this sing-fest at the end of the wearisome, often monotonous, sometimes deathly dangerous day. Somehow, it seemed to etch more clearly in the minds of all the vision of what lay at the end of the trail—and, more important, it brought the wagon company closer together. Not as individuals, each with his private ambitions, but as *one* group with *one* common thought.

Next morning, when the cry came to string out, the tunes of the night before would still be in the air. Men would go whistling about the new day's chores. Tired bodies and overstrained nerves and the whisperings of turning back and giving up would have yielded to the hope and promise and courage that are born in a singing heart.

There was a time in New Mexico, in the Lincoln County War, when a piano in a bullet-battered house heartened Billy the Kid and ten or twelve less famous gunmen and cowboys through a three-day siege against odds that, by the widest stretching of the imagination, they couldn't hope to beat. On the third day of that siege, while the McSween house which they were defending was in flames and threatening to collapse at any minute, they sang and whistled and thumped out the rhythm with sixgun butts as Mrs. McSween sat at the piano and played *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

Facing almost certain death, those dozen Western fighting men rallied with new heart to the stirring battle hymn. And the music, carrying outside the battered walls, bore their defiance to the opposing clansmen over the crackling accompaniment of flames and bullets.

The piano had gone up in smoke before Billy the Kid and the other men trapped in that burning house made the break for their lives. Mrs. McSween had made her getaway earlier. Yet the ringing, inspiring notes of the anthem must have lent

(Concluded on page 8)



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(Continued from page 6)

those men hope—and the promise of victory—as they streamed out into the night, silhouetted in the glare of the flames, to run the deadly gauntlet of bullets. For, with twenty or more heavily armed gunmen trying to blast them down, only four of the men with the Kid failed to run free.

Today, while we are fighting the greatest, most important war in the world's history, a song in our hearts will carry us to quicker victory. For some it may be the stirring melody and words of one of the old patriotic classics, such as *The Star Spangled Banner* or *America*; to others it may be a stanza or two of the great *Ballad for Americans* or the simpler strains of *Jingle Jangle Jingle* or of *Yankee Doodle*.

It doesn't much matter what the song is, just so it is there in our hearts and at the tips of our tongues—to see us through, when the skies look black and we need a little something extra to keep us going. The important thing is that we march.

To sustain their courage day after day on the tiring, disheartening wagon trip across the continent, the early pioneers had to keep in mind the goal, the promise of new opportunities and of unclaimed wealth that awaited them at the end. To keep heart today, through the sacrifices and hardships and heavy work, we can't for a minute forget our goal, the victory we must win if we are to survive. And if singing is going to help us win through to that goal, giving us a lift and a revived strength for the trail ahead, as it did for the pioneers, our war is half won already.

We are a singing nation, an optimistic, brave nation. We are working and fighting for ideals and for a way of living that are truly American, and that we know to be right. The record of our first year at war shows how wholeheartedly we can back up those ideals, how hard we can fight and how hard we can work.

We know we have to win, so we are going to win. And if, by singing, we can add fuel to the fires and win more quickly—all together, let's sing!

Inspired by the words of a Navy Chaplain at Pearl Harbor, here's one song that will do for a fighting America until a better one comes along. It is *Praise the Lord* (copyright 1942, Famous Music Corp., New York City, Publishers to Paramount Pictures Inc.):

Down went the gunner, and then the gunner's mate

Up jumped the sky pilot, gave the boys a look

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"Praise the Lord, and pass the ammunition! Praise the Lord, and pass the ammunition!"

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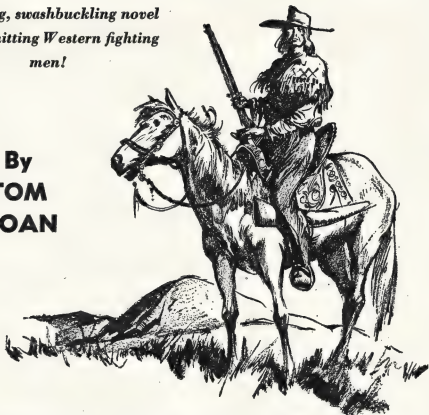
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**By
TOM
ROAN**



THAT DEVIL FROM CRAZY MOUNTAIN

CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Town Visitor

IT WAS shortly before noon when he rode in from the wild hills north of town and clattered into Cold Water, the meanest hole west of the Yellowstone. Mounted on a wall-eyed white gelding that was more outlaw than saddle horse, he was as long and lean as sin—a gangling, goose-necked young fellow with

yellow hair that hung in a wind-blown cloud beneath the great flat brim of an old-time plainsman's white hat.

The rest of his get-up might have been hauled off a buffalo man or an Indian scout. He wore buckskin, beaded and fringed from his square shoulders to the spurred heels of the soft moccasins on his big feet. In his belt were Navy sixes—long and mean old bone-butted cap-an'-balls that had cut their share of bloody trails.

★ *He spoke soft and did what his pappy told him to, that half-wild buckskin man from Crazy Mountain. But, when the Cold* ★
★ *Water gun-gang tried to crowd him into a corner, the old* ★
★ *cap-and-ball pistols he wore at his sides stood ready to tell the* ★
★ *world that it never took more than one Morgan to fill Boothill!* ★

There was ease and grace in the way he sat his horse.

The saddle, like the rest of his garb, was old, the flaring horn uptilted in front, as broad as a breakfast plate. It was double-cinched and weighed eighty pounds if an ounce, a great Mexican saddle that was in vogue when the Southwest was young. A recent covering of strong oak-tanned leather had made it as good as new. The only really new thing about him was his long-barreled Winchester.

It was Saturday, and Cold Water was in no mood for such a visitor. Big Oak Tanner, the sheriff, had hung a man the day before on the scaffold in the corral behind the old log-and-stone jail at the lower end of the street.

The usual run of thrill-seeking human-

It was hell down there while it lasted.

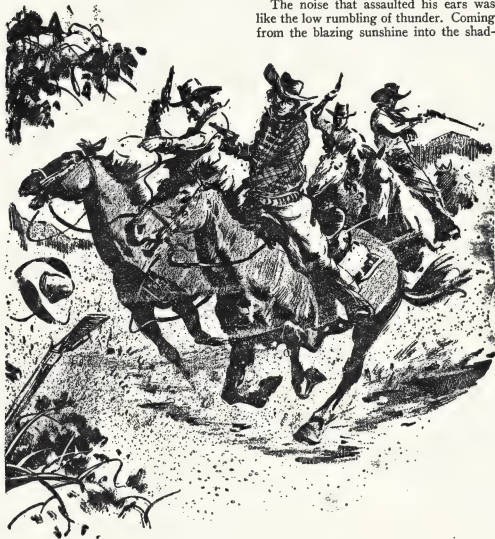


ity had come to witness the execution. Many wagons, camp outfits and buckboards were still in evidence behind the false-fronted buildings on the shaded bank of the creek that curled around the west side of the town. All the saloons, gambling dives and dance halls were doing a land office business. Many of the hard-drinking crowd had been in Cold Water for three or four days before the hanging. They would go right on drinking and hell-raising until they ran out of money. Some of them would wait for Friday to come again in order to witness Big Oak Tanner's eighth hanging. They would enjoy it.

Gunmen were everywhere, half of them wearing nickel-plated stars that supposedly gave them the right to uphold law and order. They were strung up and down the street, shifty-eyed hombres leaning in doorways or mingling with the mobs. There had been any number of fights.

Ignoring the stares, the stranger slid out of his saddle in front of the Longhorn Cowboy, on the west side of the street across from the red brick bank. For several moments he stood there, green eyes wandering around. Then he turned, pushed through the red swing doors, and moved to the great bar.

The noise that assaulted his ears was like the low rumbling of thunder. Coming from the blazing sunshine into the shad-



ows, he was almost blinded for a moment.

As things began to clear, he saw that there were at least twenty men standing with their backs to the bar. Others lined the walls, some of them standing on the tables. They were a rough and evil looking lot, cowpunchers, crimps from the dancehalls, miners from their claims in the hills around the town, floaters, gunmen and sheepherders, and all of them were staring at a powerful redhead with a star on his chest who stood with his head lowered like a bull in the center of the room.

"He's gonna get up again!" hissed a voice. "Damn, he can take it!"

"Yeah," agreed another. "Hard as a pine knot, some of these young roosters. If the damn fool had any sense he'd quit."

"Maybe I ain't ready for 'im to quit," sneered the man with the star. "Maybe I'm goin' right on an' beat his head off his shoulders an' throw it at his dyin' rump!"

That man was Big Oak Tanner, the six-foot, bull chested two-gun sheriff of Cold Water. In front of him, sprawled against the footrail of the bar, lay a victim of the man's powerful fists. To the stranger at the head of the bar the bloody-faced man on the floor looked no more than a youth of twenty. Having just been kicked in the stomach as he went down, he was lying there gasping for breath.

Big Oak Tanner was waiting for the kill. Blood seeped from his great beak of a nose. Oaths rumbled from him from time to time as he waited for the young fellow to stumble to his feet so he could go crashing into him before he could get his hands up.

The sheriff's voice was like grating rock. "When I ask a man questions," he snarled, mopping blood from his nose and lips with the back of a red-haired fist, "that man better answer up straight an' fast. I'm the law of this damned town. I'm sheriff, by Gawd, judge an' jury! Get up from there before I start stompin' the liver out of yore brisket!"

The man against the rail stirred painfully. He groaned when he got to his hands and knees. The sheriff cursed him again. The young man came on up, tottering. The sheriff stepped in. A power-

ful right fist shot a driving blow to the weaving man's jaw. Something snapped as his head went back.

Before he could fall Tanner caught him with a left. It sent his feet jerking backwards from under him, his body curving, and he pitched face down on the floor.

"Damn!" hissed a startled onlooker. "Yuh broke his neck that time as shore as shootin', Big Oak!"

"Shut yore mouth" snarled the sheriff. "Here, yuh two!" He jerked his thumb at two burly gunmen standing on tables against the wall. "Drag 'im out the back way an' down to the jail. I'll tag along behind."

♦ ♦ ♦

THE man was carried out, head dangling like a ball in a sack on his long, limp neck. Behind there was silence. Men looked at one another, with a slight shake of the head here and there.

The big, red-faced Irishman behind the bar was the first to speak. "Holy Moses," he whispered, "that was a blow!"

"Got what was comin' to 'im!" said a dark-eyed gunman. "The fool oughta knowed better. Gimme a drink, Callihan. An'," he warned, head lowered, eyes narrow and dangerous, "if yuh got any opinions, yuh better keep them to yoreself. Get that straight an' keep it that way! That goes for ever'body else in this dump, too. Gimme a drink, I said!"

"Sure—sure, Jake!" The bartender started placing bottles and glasses on the bar. "But—but don't think I'm voicin' opinions. I was just thinkin' about how hard Big Oak can hit. Why—why, a mule couldn't kick that hard!"

"He's a good sheriff, ain't he?" The gunman was leering, ready to start a fight at a word. "Best sheriff Cold Water ever had, ain't he?"

"Yes, the best Cold Water ever had!" agreed the bartender, nervously. "Hell, Jake, all the boys know that! Why—why, ever'body swears by Big Oak!"

"Then it oughta call for a little drink on the house. Just to show yore appreciation for Big Oak takin' 'im outa here, yuh see."

"Sure—sure!" nodded the Irishman.

"Step up, ever'body. It's like Jake Lang says. We oughta all show our appreciation. What's yore poison, brother?" He swung to the stranger and set two bottles and a glass before him without waiting for his answer. "Red Eye or plain white lightnin'—it's all on the house."

"If yuh don't mind, mister—" the stranger laid a silver dollar on the bar—"an' it won't be too much trouble, then I reckon I'll have me a nice coolin' bottle of soda water. I'm like my pappy. I like sarsaparilla the best."

It was the one thing needed to break the sullen spell. A snicker started near the head of the bar. It grew in volume as it raced down the length of the room, then came back, growing into a side-splitting roar of laughter.

Even Jake Lang, the gunman, laughed. "Sarsp'rilla!" he bawled, slapping the bar with his hat. "Lord, blow my ears off now, 'cause I've done heard all there is to hear! Give 'im panther milk, Red. Hell, he ain't yet weaned!"

"I ain't never drunk panther milk, mister." The stranger was so patient it was

almost a shame. "Mean an' sneakin' as panthers are, I don't reckon I'd care to try their milk. One winter, though, we did drink mare milk where I come from. Had to. We was all froze-in. The snow stood deeper'n the trees in the drifts, an' the weather glass dropped down to seventy below."

"Whe-ew!" mocked Lang. "What a whopper!"

"Where I come from—" the stranger's eyes narrowed and became as hard as glass—"they don't tell lies, mister."

"An' where the hell," growled Lang, deliberately trying to start a fight, "do yuh come from, buckskin fella? Not the North Pole, I reckon?"

"I am a Crazy Mountain man. I left the brow just 'fore dawn."

"Yesterday," nodded Callihan, "of course?"

"This mornin'," corrected the man, quietly, "an' here I am."

"Rid a bald eagle, prob'ly!" jeered Lang, still itching for trouble.

"I rid my Brimstone hoss. Dawn comes to the mountain about three o'clock. We

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4. CLEAN BLADE in water by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

had close to eight hours to make it."

"Ten miles an hour, thereabouts!" scowled Callihan, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "That's travelin', considerin' them trails."

"I still say it's flyin'," growled Lang. "I know them trails. Leastwise, I know 'em to the foot of the mountain. Never had little enough sense to want to go up."

"Well—" Callihan opened his hands and shrugged as if to change the subject before it would go beyond words "—we ain't got no soft drink stuff, stranger. In ten years I've been barkeepin' in Cold Water I ain't never heard a man call for it."

"Much obliged just the same, mister." The stranger picked up his dollar, touched his hat and turned back toward the door. "Maybe I can get somethin' a mite coolin' in the little eatin' place acrost the street. Good mornin' to all of yuh, gents."

He would have gone on about his business if he had been let alone, but it was too much for the pugnacious Jake Lang. Damned fools coming into Cold Water and asking for soda pop was more than a good man could stand!

Lang swung back to the outer edge of the crowd, going to show this duck that he was among real men. He jerked into a crouch, hands sawing for a six-shooter at either hip. A double-thundering roar filled the room as he sent two bullets splattering lead on the floor at the stranger's moccasined and spurred heels.

It was like uncorking lightning and turning it loose on everything in sight. The stranger ducked, leaping to one side, quicker than a startled wildcat wheeling. No one actually saw the bone-butted old cap-an'-balls fill his gangling hands. They saw only the two jerking spurts of flame and heard the roar of the two shots.

Jake Lang staggered back, long black six-shooters slipping from his hands, a sob, a grunt, and then a moan of terror and pain coming from him. Wild eyes now were all over the room as Lang's shaking arms came up, hands dangling uselessly, the blood flying in squirting ribbons from his bullet-shattered wrists.

"Damn—Damn it!" he howled. "Oh, Gawd—Gawd, I'm shot! He's shot my hands off an'—an' I was only shootin' at his fool feet to—to make 'im dance!"

"Where I come from," intoned the stranger, without the slightest hint of malice in his voice, "we never pull a gun unless that gun's pulled for blood. I dance for fun when I dance, not 'cause I'm bein' made to do it. If there's any other man who wants to take up where yuh left off, then I invite that man to fill his hand."

CHAPTER TWO

The Law Speaks

JAKE LANG had friends in that room, enough of them to mob a lone man, but the stranger was not afraid. There he stood, as bold as cocked guns, no trace of anger in his face as he waited for somebody to call his hand. They simply glared him up and down, staring at him pop-eyed, mouths aslack as if they had never seen him before—as if he was something the cat and the Old Hairy Man, himself, had suddenly dragged in. Around his lean face the gunsmoke swirled in ringlets as if he drew it to him by some strange magnetic power.

Many of those men had never seen a Crazy Mountain man before, but there was not one in the place who had not heard of them. A bronco breed, most men said of them, as untamed as the day they came lumbering into Montana Territory with a battle-scarred wagon train from the hills of Tennessee. Indian-harassed from the Platte to the mouth of the Yellowstone, they had died like flies on the way. Out of more than ninety wagons in the beginning, fewer than a third had pulled through. Like eagles searching for a roost, they had headed on as high as they could go, and up there in the Crazies they had settled down.

This man was one of them, and that should have been enough reason to let him alone. Those who knew them best said they would give self-respecting men the shirts off their backs, but they were half-devils when their hands were forced in a fight.

"I'm kinda sorry things sorter flew off the handle," he told them in a voice that was like the hollow chuckling of a ghost. "My pappy usually does the fightin' where I come from. Ag'in, gents, I bid yuh good-day."

It was remarkable that such a man could get out of the Longhorn Cowboy alive. Any number of men had died here for less, but out he sidled, swing-doors sucking the smoke around him. The crowd stood as if paralyzed, each man waiting for somebody else to make the first move, until Lang slumped to the sawdust on the floor, sobbing and cursing for a doctor.

That broke the spell. Never had any gunman of Cold Water been cowed like this! Every man in the room seemed to take it as a personal insult. Six-shooters dragging from holsters, the mob split and plunged to the windows at either side of the door. Even in that sudden rush no one was fool enough to go bolting out through those swinging doors. It was a good thing that no one tried.

Each side of the split mob crowded up to a window at almost the same instant. They were just as quick to come slamming back, stumbling and falling over one another. Two shots had thundered as one outside. A bullet had slapped into the main cross-bar of each window, showering the men at the head of the mobs with a sudden splattering of glass and flying bits of old wood.

"Damn!" snarled a man, voice thickened by his all-morning drinking. "I can't stand busted glass smackin' me in the face! Swing about! Out the back way an' through the alley—an' we'll put his light out!"

"Yuh better wait, fellas!" Callihan threw up his hands. "Yuh better wait! Let the sheriff take care of 'im! Big Oak hates the guts of them Crazy Mountain people!"

"To hell with Big Oak!" barked a half-drunk bronco buster. "Come on, fellas, let's give that bird what's comin'!"

There was no stopping them. It was an easy thing to go away from their man, and everybody in the room except Callihan raced out the back doorway. But it was soon evident that the stranger was taking advantage of an opportunity. They heard a fierce clatter of hoofs in the street, a wild burst of shots from the other side of it, and the tall white horse was swinging away.

"Down the street!" bawled a voice. "He's goin' down the street! Get to yore

saddles an' hit 'em fast. No, wait! Why—why, damn it, he's ridin' straight to the jailhouse! Must be goin' to turn 'imself in to Big Oak in person!"



BIG OAK TANNER'S face looked rock-hard when he walked up the stairs from the basement with Wince Halliday and Rube Satterlee, his two gunmen, slumping along behind him. They came back into the office of the jail. Men who "resisted" an arrest were always taken down into that basement. It was the best place in town to beat a man half to death with a blackjack, and if a prisoner should die during the beating the body could be carried out at night and dropped into a whirlpool in the creek a mile below Cold Water. There the body would be sucked down, never to be seen again—like a feather dropped into a hot stove.

"Take it out tonight," Tanner ordered in a low voice. "I didn't know the young fool's neck was as brittle as a clay pipe's stem. Yuh can noise it around tomorrow that he got a chance an' escaped."

"Been a lot of 'em 'escaped' since yuh got in office, Big Oak," grinned long-legged, hump-backed Satterlee. "That last punch yuh let go with woulda killed a bull. Why—why, I never saw such a lick!"

The burly, dark-bearded Halliday frowned. "I didn't see no lick. Know what he's talkin' about, Big Oak?"

"Me an' yuh wouldn't know," scowled the sheriff. "We've got sense—enough to forget things when they happen. Wince only likes to run off at the mouth. What the hell's goin' on up the street now? Who's doin' that shootin'?"

The tall man in buckskins had just left the Longhorn Cowboy and was flinging himself into his saddle, and some drunken rowdy was firing his six-shooter in the air. It was the first time the sheriff had actually noticed the buckskinned man, but at once Big Oak Tanner's brows were puckered, face slowly knitting into a cloud. As the horseman plunged across the creek a splotch of paleness filled the sheriff's cheeks.

"Back there!" he grated, nodding

toward a small store room behind his broad desk in the southwest corner of the big jail office. "I'll handle this. Keep out of it unless yuh hear me cough three times. That's Lance Morgan from Crazy Mountain headin' this way. An' they don't make 'em tougher an' meaner'n Lance when he's on the mad at somethin'."

Halliday and Satterlee slipped quickly into the store room and closed the door. Tanner moved back behind his desk and dropped into his swivel chair. He propped his red-booted feet on the desk in front of him. From a drawer of the desk he removed a stubby-nosed little derringer, a double-barreled, deadly weapon at close range. In each barrel was a short .41 rim-fire cartridge with a hole bored into the nose so that it would split and tear if fired into a man's belly. He examined the weapon critically, then slipped it into his left sleeve, where it would drop into his hand at a slight movement of his arm.

He did not yet know what Lance Morgan had got himself into up the street, but he had left a world of excitement behind him. Mobs were now pouring out of the Longhorn Cowboy. As Morgan was slipping from his white horse's saddle in front of the jail porch, Tanner saw Jake Lang come staggering out of the saloon with a man at either side of him as he headed across the street for Dr. Nelson's little office. Jake had been shot. That was a certainty.

Lance Morgan was coming on into the office. In a moment he had halted in the tall doorway.

Neither man spoke for a moment. Tanner was staring at his visitor's face. There was something about it that reminded him of a lean, half-starved wolf. The eyes at either side of the curving blade of a nose had become like blue-green ice in a stormy winter day. It was a face sharp and cold—the hard-set face of a fighting man ready to mix gunsmoke with anybody in sight.

Tanner swallowed a couple of times before he spoke. Finally he said, "Howdy, Lance."

"Howdy." The icy eyes raked the room, focused hard and intently for a second on the steel door that closed off the corridor of the jail, then back to Tanner as quick

as triggers. "I was in the Longhorn a little while ago. Saw yuh kill the young fella with yore fist."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Morgan's voice had a frosty crinkle to it. "I don't know what the fight was about. I reckon it was none of my business, but hittin' 'im like yuh did was as good as sneakin' up in the dark an' shovin' a knife in a blind man's back."

"Yuh mad about it?"

"I don't know." An ugly little smile twisted Morgan's lips. "I'm tryin' hard not to be. As I said, it was none of my business, an' I don't want to make it mine. We Morgans ain't got much sense when we get mad. I reckon I don't have to tell yuh that."

"No, yuh don't have to tell me." The sheriff frowned. His voice was like a mean dog growl as he went on. "I might ask, though, just what in hell an' Tom Walker yuh want in Cold Water?"

"Me an' yuh used to be friends—before yuh left the Crazies five years ago, Oak."

"When I left the Crazies—" Tanner's eyes were mean and dangerous, his words slurring from the side of his mouth "—I left 'em."

"An' all what was on 'em," nodded Morgan. "I get the point. I've got hawg sense, Oak. Yuh even don't like for folks to know yuh was once on the Crazies. We don't care much about it up there. Yuh was not one of us in the first place. We only took yuh in . . ."

"Like you take in anybody with a price on his head up there on that damned mountain."

" . . . because," Morgan was going on as if he had not heard him, "yuh was shot up an' about done for. The law was on yore heels. There was a reward on yore head. We don't collect rewards up our way. Yuh knowed that—an' yuh come ridin' in, half-froze an' near-dead. Dan Snead took yuh in up there. We never turn a man past our door, 'specially if he's hurt. Dan an' his folks nussed yuh back to life. Yuh know how yuh left Dan's oldest gal when yuh sneaked off."

There was a slight pause, then: "We don't go to law on the Crazies. A man who'll law yuh won't fight yuh. Yuh knowed that. I was only a boy at the time, but I kept Dan Snead from followin'

yuh. It was a boy, but he don't seem to have picked up yore mean an' uncarin' ways, Oak. His mother can be thankful for that, as yuh might know."

"And?" Tanner leaned forward, conscious of the weight in his left sleeve. "Go on. I'm a sheriff now, an' I've made my peace with the law where I was wanted. But go on. What in hell do you want in Cold Water?"

"The fella yuh aim to hang, come next Friday."

"Young Jack Katy, eh?" An ugly, leering grin etched its way across the sheriff's big, ruddy face and exploded into a short, harsh laugh. "Expect to get 'im, do yuh?"

"Either him or yuh," said Morgan. "I'd rather have Jack Katy, of course. I never cared much for skunks. They smell no matter how quick yuh kill 'em."

"Yo're a damn fool, Lance!" Tanner sat back in his chair and laughed again. "Jack Katy came here, tryin' to rob that bank up the street. He killed a man in cold blood in this town, an' Jack Katy's goin' to hang. Oughta hung yesterday, but," he shrugged, "I space my hangin's as a sort of a public attraction. Keeps people comin' to town, spendin' money an' makin' things lively."

"Jack didn't kill nobody in yore town, Oak." The blue-green ice in Morgan's eyes was sheening now. "He didn't try to rob nobody. Jack had thirty thousand dollars comin' to him from ol' Anse Skinner in that bank. He come here tryin' to collect from ol' Anse for cattle him an' his folks sold to Anse on the mountain. In the fight somebody maybe did get killed, but a stray shot in the bank done it, an' ol' Anse Skinner's still got the money."

"That may be Jack Katy's tale, but . . . Say—" his eyes widened as he glanced through a window and up the street "—what in hell did yuh do in the Longhorn?"

Lance Morgan told him, simply, unflinchingly.

"Yeah," nodded the sheriff, "an' I see a crowd headin' this way. Yuh would be just fool enough to come here, stackin' yore ol' cap-an'-balls ag'in one of the best triggers in Cold Water. But let me tell yuh something, straight out." His voice lifted and he paused to cough three times behind his hand. "Yuh only come here to get yoreself jailed."

"He ain't jokin', buckskin!" The door behind the sheriff had swung open. Wince Halliday stood there, a big six-shooter in each hand. "In Cold Water, mister, we're the law. We—uh—we—"

Wince Halliday's voice clogged in his throat, his eyes growing large and round. His six-shooters were covering the man in buckskin, but an old cap-an'-ball had come into that man's right hand quicker than the blink of an eye, and its ugly muzzle was aimed unerringly at the sheriff's belly.

CHAPTER THREE

Gunamoke Spells War

"WHEN you shoot," intoned the man in the doorway, slowly beginning to move forward on those noiseless big feet, "then I'm lettin' drive. Big Oak can tell yuh I don't miss what I shoot at. I'll kill him as yuh pull yore trigger on me. He knows I ain't jokin'."

"If yo've got yore guns on 'im, put 'em down, Wince." The sheriff's voice was low, cautious, as he slowly lifted his hands. "This damned fool will kill me, sure as hell."

"An' yuh might tell 'im," said Morgan, "to call out that other shykepoken who jerked the door open for 'im. Then yuh can tell 'em to get outa here, Oak. My business is with yuh. I aim, if I can, to keep yuh alive until I get it done."

"Get out, boys!" Tanner had not yet turned his head. He sat there, hands still up, eyes two reddish buttons staring straight into Lance Morgan's icy-green eyes. "Get to the creek an' stop that mob headin' this way. If some fool in the crowd happened to take a pop at this squirt through the window, he'd kill me."

"Yuh've got sense when yuh wanta use it, Oak." Morgan had come on, old cap-an'-ball unwavering. Ignoring Wince Halliday and Rube Satterlee as if they did not exist, he stepped on around the end of the desk and placed the muzzle of his weapon solidly behind the sheriff's left ear. "Better do as yore lord an' master says, gun-pups."

"Get—get out, I said!" the sheriff roared. "Good Gawd, do I have to get up

an' kick yore teeth out to make yuh mind me? Get out an' stop that bunch headin' for the jail! Turn 'em back. Tell 'em, damn it, not to come shovin' their necks up here or somebody'll get shot!"

"An' don't forget," Morgan added, "to tell 'em Big Oak's the hunk of polecat meat who'll stop the lead."

Halliday and Satterlee, looking like two whipped curs with their tails between their legs, moved on, holstering their weapons. When they reached the porch they were like scared boars. They went forward at a run, each man with his hands lifted, each yelling at the top of his voice.

"Go back!" they bawled in unison. "*Go back!*"

"Get up, Oak!" Morgan moved back into the corner. "Yuh can unbuckle them big belts an' poke yore guns in 'a drawer of that desk. Then yuh can pick up yore keys."

"Yo're a damned fool, Lance!" snarled the sheriff as he arose. "What in hell good do yuh think all this is goin' to do yuh? Hell fire, man, yuh can't get away with it! That gang outside will shoot yore legs from under yuh an' swing yuh to a limb, an' I'll laugh in yore teeth when yuh swing, *damn yuh!*"

"Quit cussin' me, Oak!" Morgan gave him a jab in the ribs with his old revolver. The sheriff winced, and as he winced the derringer slipped from his sleeve and fell to the floor. "Hideout, huh? Well, it didn't do yuh much good. But yuh was sayin' yuh would laugh when they string me up. But yuh won't laugh, Big Oak. Bad as I hate to use bad words, there's only one way to say some things, an' here it is: If that mob gets me yuh'll be too *damned* dead to laugh at anybody, 'cause yuh're goin' outa here when me an' Jack Katy goes. Keep that in your mind."

"Yuh—yuh ain't figurin' on takin' me back to the Crazies, Lance?" Tanner's voice shook for the first time. "Yuh—yuh ain't—"

"Nope, I ain't figurin' on that." Morgan grinned. "Not unless yuh make me mad, then I'm apt to do anything yuh don't want done. Yore big feet have done all the walkin' they had a right to do up on the Crazies. Dan Snead would only kill yuh, an' yuh ain't worth the price of the

powder an' ball it'd take. That's right, the keys. Now head for that jail door."

"Yuh see that crowd, don't yuh?" There was a whimper in Tanner's voice now in spite of his fierce nature and undying bully spirit. "Yuh see 'em pilin' up this side of the creek? Man, man, they'll tear yuh apart when they get here!"

"Maybe yo're right, Oak, but I've told yuh yuh won't be there to see it. *Open that door!*"

Tanner opened it, cursing in a blubbing voice. There were twenty-one men packed into the filthy cells. Those who had not already been tried and sentenced soon would be. The trials would take place on the porch of the jail, in the office or in one of the saloons. Each would be the usual "fair and impartial trial" with more than half of them conducted by the sheriff as arresting officer, judge and jury. The more important cases would come before old fat Judge Boot Hill Shank, a red-nosed, whiskey-bloated tank. As usual in court procedure, each victim would be fined to the limit of what he could pay or dig up from his friends. It took money to run a court in Cold Water.



"**L**ANCE!" A tall, raw-boned youth down the corridor seized the bars of his cell door, rattling it. "*Lance!*"

"It's me, Jack," Morgan answered grimly. "Just keep yore shirt on. Yuh mighta knowed some of us mountain folks would come. Start unlockin' doors, Oak."

"Gosh—gosh, Lance!" The youth beyond that steel door had a catch in his voice. "I—I'm so glad to see yuh, Lance!"

"An' if I wasn't glad to see yuh," Morgan said, his face as emotionless as a rock, "then I wouldn't be here. What are yuh waitin' for, Oak?"

"Yuh ain't turnin' the whole mess out?" snarled the sheriff. "Damn it, Jack's the only one yuh want."

Morgan smiled faintly. "I ain't turnin' 'em out. I'm just havin' yuh unlock the doors. It's close in here an' they all look like they could stand a little fresh air. I'd like to hang the man who built this dirty hole."

"Now yuh wait," pleaded the sheriff. "I ain't got nothin' to fight with. These men'll be like wolves jumpin' on me."

"Ain't nobody goin' to jump on yuh, Oak." Morgan's voice was flat, hard, and loud enough for every prisoner in the jail to hear it. "I need yuh. It's by hangin' on to yuh that me an' Jack's goin' to make our getaway outa this town. Yuh men keep yore hands off when yuh come out. If it suits yuh, yuh birds can streak it straight to the office of the jail an' get yore guns. I ain't tellin' yuh what to do after that. I ain't no man's boss, an' no-body bosses me."

They came out like cattle, though Jack Katy was the first. He leaped forward, sawing a cap-an'-ball from Morgan's left holster—a gray-eyed, deadly youth, held

waiting for a chance to charge. Lance Morgan's horse—resenting the growing excitement—had left the front of the porch, going on around the jail to the corrals. The Grand River man could see Satterlee and Halliday bouncing up and down in front of the crowd and waving their arms to hold it in place. Before any one could stop him the big sandy-haired man from Grand River was at the door with a pair of .45's slung around him on their heavy belts and one of Big Oak Tanner's Winchesters in his hands.

"Turn 'round, Rube Satterlee!" he bawled. "Turn with 'im, Wince Halliday! One of yuh ain't got a gun jammed to the cylinder in my ribs now while the other's bustin' my scalp open with a six-gun an' tryin' to kick my lungs out at

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in check by what Lance Morgan had said.

The others were just as dangerous. The same hunted animal glint filled their eyes. Hands worked, opening and closing, hungry for the feel of a throat, and teeth grated as if the enamel was being ground off as they looked at the sheriff, shorn now of every semblance of authority except that glittering star on his vest. One blow of a fist would have started a man-mauling that would have left the sheriff torn to ribbons, but Jack Katy was helping now, ushering men on toward the office of the jail as fast as they stepped from their cells.

It was a cowboy from Grand River, forty miles south of Cold Water, who broke loose the hell and started the fire-works. A big sandy-haired man whose face still showed the deep cuts and blue-black marks of one of a pistol-whippings by the merciless Wince Halliday and Rube Satterlee, he could not contain himself when he came to the gun-lockers.

A mob of humanity stood on the south bank of the creek like savage animals

the same time. Turn, *damn yuh!* Turn, look me in the eye, an' *die in yore tracks!*"

Rube Satterlee and Wince Halliday were none too bright. They should have had enough sense to dive into the crowd and run for it, but that voice roaring in the doorway was too much for them. They turned, eyes popping, mouths open.

A short, bow-legged man, a drunken fool not to be held any longer, took a shot at the Grand River man. A bullet smashed into the jamb of the doorway, and a split-second later, the Winchester crashed. The drunk yelled, spun around on his heel, and tumbled to the ground, with the rest of the crowd flinging back to take quick cover under the rise of the creek bank.

Satterlee and Halliday were stricken speechless and thoughtless in their tracks. They stood there, hands half-lifted, a look of terror in their eyes. The Grand River man was grinning at them over the long barrel of the Winchester.

"Yuh not only beat me up," he bawled, "after I'd told yuh I'd go peaceful to jail with yuh! Yuh two dirty, low-down

skunks robbed me of forty dollars an' my dead granddaddy's gold watch. *Reach for 'em!*"

Another shot tore at him from under the protecting wall of the creek bank. He fired then, and Satterlee wheeled around on his heel, buckled with both hands clawed to his belly, the quick blood pouring through his fingers, and went pitching face-forward into the grass.

Wince Halliday started to swing around, but his terror had been too much for him. He had waited too long. Down went the loading-lever of the Winchester, and up it came with a vicious *click-clack!* There was no aiming of the rifle. The Grand River man was a dead-shot from the hip.

Halliday reeled about on one foot, his right leg jerking upward. In a crazy fall he went down, shot through the head as the Grand River man whipped back and slammed the door as a hail of lead from the creek bank splintered the old wood.

"Now, damn 'im," snarled Sheriff Tanner from the corridor of the jail, his voice like a startled dog's sudden yelping, "that fool's got it started! There's a man-sized war on yore hands now—an' I'm waitin' to see yuh shoot yore way out of it, Lance Morgan!"

CHAPTER FOUR

A Call for Trigger Jones

ACE TUCKER, the Grand River man, had been the first to taste revenge, and it was Ace Tucker who was the first to be knocked off his feet by a bullet. A rifle sent out a long, splintering report from the little blacksmith shop on the bank of the creek, just beyond the foot bridge. A bullet with tremendous striking power sliced through the great door. Tucker had just turned away from the door after throwing heavy bars in place. There was a *plop* like buck-shot striking a gourd, and he was down on his hands and knees. A trickle of blood came from his torn scalp where the near-spent bullet had nicked him and dropped harmlessly to the floor.

"They can't do this to me!" he belated, coming up with a wild surge. "I'll eat 'em alive!"

But Lance Morgan was there in time to stop him from lurching to a window to get himself riddled with lead. He drove a right fist against the man's jaw, and Ace Tucker was down again, knocked as limber as a rag. Before he could stir Morgan had seized him by the collar and flung him against the yard-thick wall at the left side of the door.

Big Oak Tanner was now hustled back into a cell and locked in, to make certain he would be out of the way and none of the prisoners would turn on him and start taking him apart in the heat of the fight. All the fight seemed to have been drawn out of the sheriff. His face was bloodless, his eyes big and glaring.

Morgan and Jack Katy had not left him for more than two minutes before he was roaring and cursing out the window, "Stop it! Stop it!" His voice was loud enough to be heard all the way to the upper end of the street. "Get some sense into yore damn fool heads out there! This is the sheriff talkin' to yuh! *Big Oak Tanner talkin' to yuh!* Stop it before yuh kill me!"

A roar of whiskey-thick yells and oaths answered him, and with it came a furious burst of shots that rained slapping, glancing bullets against the jail. The whole bank of the creek seemed to be coming to life with gashing ribbons of flame, and riflemen up the street were joining in from the roofs and windows. The hidden gunman in the blacksmith shop was still driving away, keeping up a steady pounding of shots on the big door after two of the prisoners had managed to yank shut the steel shutters over the windows facing the creek.

All Cold Water seemed to have taken the notion to pump lead into the old jail in spite of the sheriff's yelling. But it was a jail that would stand like a rock. It was the oldest place in Cold Water, having been built as a trading post when the entire country was filled with hostile Indians. Bearded and buckskinned traders inside these same old walls had stood off many howling bands of painted savages in the past. Only cannon balls could shake down those walls. Bullets would only mar them. Gunfire could do no harm unless it came through a window where the steel shutters were not closed.

"Keep away from that door," warned Morgan, "an' keep a close watch on the side windows. Have them shutters ready to close if the crowd decides to swing around us. We may have to fight a long time before we start makin' a break for it."

Tanner was still yelling from his cell window, fearful that some one in the mob outside would deliberately try to kill him, now that everybody was shooting and the blame could not be placed on any particular man.

"A lot of 'em in this town would like to get me," he half-sobbed. "They wouldn't have the guts to do it at any other time. They're plain sneaks, that's what they are. Just as soon shoot a man in the back as to eat a decent meal, damn 'em."

"An' how many men have yuh shot in the back?" sneered a big cowboy from Milk River as he swung to the cell to glare through the bars. "Hell, yuh couldn't count 'em on yore fingers an' toes, Tanner. Look at 'im shake, fellas! Come here an' look at 'im!"

"He ain't a big oak no more!" chirped in a little bucktoothed bronco buster. "He's a quakin' asp saplin' now!"

"Naw, he ain't!" laughed another prisoner. "He's the mean ol' tail-end of a rattlesnake!"

"Hell, them ain't rattlesnake rattles yuh hear, cowboy!" screeched the bucktooth. "Them things yuh hear is just his teeth chatterin'. He's so scared his ears have flopped an' all his guts have turned to yaller water. Gi'me somethin' to poke 'im with an' we'll hear 'im bray like a jack-ass."

"Let me at 'im!" Ace Tucker had returned to consciousness and crawled away from the wall. Now he was coming down the corridor, shaking his head like a bewildered bull. "I'll poke 'im with a bullet square betwixt them mean ol' red eyes, the dirty buzzard!"

Morgan drove him back by seizing him by the shoulders and trying to shake more sense back into his befuddled brain. For a moment it looked as if Tucker was going to turn on him and fight, but others seized the man, half-dragging him away and pushing him into a cell where they started pouring cold water on his head from a rusty tap in the corner.

"Yuh'll play good or we'll bust yore brains out!" growled a big, black-haired cowboy from Timberline Buttes. "If there's any brains in that empty bucket yuh tote around on yore neck to call a head. That Crazy Mountain fella wants Big Oak with a whole hide to help take us outa here, an' what the Crazy Mountain fella says goes with me, win, lose or draw!"

"All right, cow servant, all right." Tucker shook his dripping head, the sudden splashing of ice-cold water really bringing him back to his senses now. "Hold yore mule! Yuh're backin' that Crazy Mountain duck no more'n I am. Judgin' from the way he knocked hell outa me—well, I figure a jasper like that just can't lose any game he sets in on. Holy catfish, look at that! Say, where'n hell did I get all this blood on my head?"



OUTSIDE the crowd was scattering up and down the creek, moving to new places from which to reopen their fire on the jail. All Cold Water had gone fight-mad by this time. Rube Satterlee and Wince Halliday had lived just long enough to blurt out their own tale of what was taking place in the jail. The word had spread that Cold Water was to have a grandstand jail delivery right under everybody's nose, and not a man in town was going to stand for it.

Old Anse Skinner had heard about it in his little dingy office in the bank. He sat in his padded chair behind his desk, a man nearing eighty, buzzard-like face as long and lean as a mummy's, wrinkled lips sucking at his store-bought teeth, and a thin beard—dry and crinkly and dyed to a ferocious black—trying to hide the lack of a chin. The little black eyes, deep in their shallow pockets, had become like pinpoints of dark fire. Not for forty Big Oak Tanners did he want to face that young hellion, Jack Katy, again.

No, damn it, Anse Skinner was too old to fight, to go out acting up and throwing lead with a lot of slick gun-squirts. If a man had sense when he was old he did not have to fight like an ordinary bar-room rowdy. Men like Big Oak Tanner and his crew could be had for such things.

Killing a man—or a dozen men, for that matter—was a business proposition with them. So much per day, so much per man, and no questions about it.

Yet Anse Skinner had found himself forced to fight when young Jack Katy had come to town only a month ago. He had not tried to gun-flag it out with that hellion. Instead, he had picked up a chair with which to defend himself. Big Oak Tanner, himself, had stepped through the back door just as the fatal shot was fired that killed old Henry Lesterbrook, the cashier. Long Alec Skinner—called Half-baked Alec behind his back—had fired that shot from just inside the door to the vault, and a banker had to protect his own son. Only the Skinners and Tanner and Katy knew who had fired that shot—and Katy had been made out a bald-faced liar in court.

"They should have hanged Katy yesterday!" Skinner swore as Long Alec came back into the little office; he got to his feet. "Half of what's known would have been wiped out forever, but that fool Tanner had to wait. Always has to put on a good show for the suckers!"

Father and son stood there, both over six feet tall, both sallow and thin. Long Alec was about forty. He had the same near-chinless, hatchet-like face, the same gangling neck with a bald, misshapen head stuck on the end of it. His "shovel" teeth stuck almost straight outward, like rafters making a roof for his upper lip. Until a dentist in Grand River had given him plates, Anse Skinner had had the same pooched mouth that looked as if it was always hopelessly straining in an attempt to cover those long, uneven teeth. Anse Skinner had killed his first man at eighteen, because the man had laughed at his mouth.

"Oak Tanner—" his voice had dropped to a drone now "—is apt to get killed before this thing's done, Alec." There was a short silence, broken only by the noise of gunfire along the street and from the bank of the creek. Then: "Well! well! Don't stand there sucking at those damned teeth! You won't have them pulled, and I wish somebody would knock them out of your face! You heard what I said, didn't you?"

"Yes, I heard." Long Alec's face had

twisted into a puzzled, half-scared frown, lips still sucking at his ugly teeth. "But—but there should be enough men in town to protect Big Oak, Pa. Only he's never needed protection before. . . . Say, what's the matter?"

"Yes, I heard." Long Alec's face had twisted into a puzzled, half-scared frown, lips still sucking at his ugly teeth. "But how—"

"Half-baked Alec!" sneered the banker as he dropped back into his chair. "People are right, and I swear it. At times you're not even sensible enough to be called a halfwit. Listen, fool!" He leaned forward, voice low, little eyes cold and cunning. "Supposing Big Oak does get killed. Couldn't we get another sheriff elected at the snap of my finger? Yes, of course I could!" He leaned back. "I'm thinking about taking a dangling sword from over your stupid head if you only knew it."

"Sword, Pa?" Long Alec glanced at the ceiling. "What sword?"

"Why, you dumb son of— Oh, never mind!" Anse Skinner had started to get up again, but he dropped back in his chair, sat there for a moment as if exhausted, and then jerked forward, alert and tense, eyes suddenly as sharp as razors. "Listen. Now that old Henry's dead, outside of us two and Big Oak, who else knows that Big Oak's got nearly forty thousand dollars in this bank?"

"Just us, I reckon, Pa." Alec's eyes were bulging.

"Of course." Anse Skinner rubbed his skeleton-like hands. "And listen. Those Crazy Mountain men will take Big Oak out of here to protect them. If Big Oak's killed in the rush we're money ahead—and no one but you and your old man knows who shot Henry."

"I get it, Pa!" Long Alec's eyes had become large and round at last. "Gee, Pa, you're smart!"

"I wish," said the old man, "I could say the same thing about my fine son without making a damned liar out of myself. But listen. Slip out of here. Get word to Trigger Jones that I want him. And be quiet about it, fool! Trigger's the best damned gunman in Montana, and it's about time I changed the symbol of authority in Cold Water."

CHAPTER FIVE

Mutiny

LANCE MORGAN had slipped out the back door under the big, ugly scaffold to let his horse into the corral by opening an enormous, iron studded door. Men who had set up the old trading post there under the cottonwoods had seen to everything to make it a place from which men could fight. The corral had a stone wall, much higher than a tall man's head. Like the walls of the jail, though those in the jail had been chinked to close them, there were slits here and there where rifles could be fired through the stone.

The stables were walled with the same stone from the banks of the creek. The original sod roof had fallen in and had been replaced with a split-board roof. Enough horses were in the stalls to mount every man in the jail, and more besides.

"Looks like we can make a break for it any ol' time, Lance." Ace Tucker grinned at him when he came back inside the jail. "They ain't doin' no damage with all that shootin'. Just wastin' lead. The whole country looks clear, out yonder behind them stables."

"Yeah." Morgan nodded, a slow smile crawling across his face as he turned and looked back out the door. "It's just a mite too clear, cowboy. Reminds me of catchin' some of them wild scallywag stag cattle on the mountain."

"I don't get it, Lance."

"Yuh mean," Morgan frowned, "yuh're a cowboy an' don't know what a scallywag stag is? That's a steer that ain't been doctored until he's about two or three. He grows up with a head on 'im like a bull, runs like a deer an' is mean-er'n sin."

"Oh, hell, I know that!" Tucker grinned. "But what's a scallywag stag got to do with this?"

"Life or death, cowboy." Morgan moved on inside the doorway and turned. "That's all clear down yonder—in looks. But yuh've got to call on yore hawg sense. When yuh run stags, what do yuh do? Yuh get yore riders 'round three sides of 'em, spreadin' out, beatin' the bushes an' yellin' or shootin' off yore pistol. Yuh

scare the hound out of 'em. They get rattled, go crazy, an' then one or two sees a break in yore line. They run for that break—"

"An'" nodded Tucker, "run right up a blind canyon."

"Yuh're usin' yore hawg sense now, cowboy." Morgan grinned broadly. "The worst thing we could do would be to head out across the purty open space, 'cause we'd be cut down by rifle balls before we'd gone three hundred yards."

It was like an old-time fort going into action when they started. Clay chinking was knocked loose with the strong iron pokers from the stoves. Big Oak Tanner's supply of new rifles and cartridges were soon blazing.

The higher loopholes, reached by a narrow balcony inside the office of the jail, were up far enough for the riflemen to look down on the mobs hiding under the bank of the creek. The gashing shots started them scattering.

Cartridges and rifles would not run out here. Big Oak Tanner had seen to that. From the day he had been elevated from chief deputy to sheriff he had been hoarding guns and ammunition, preparing his old jail for anything that might happen. Other sheriffs in the past had been run out or shot out of Cold Water when they grew too arrogant for the town, and he had never intended for such a thing to happen to him.

After the bank of the creek had been cleared, the men at the holes turned their attention to clearing the roofs of the town. In a very short time that job was done.

Big Oak Tanner had ceased bellowing. He now sat flat on the floor in one corner of the cell, keeping his broad back to the thick walls. A hopeless, beaten-dog look was on his face.

Cold water had drawn into its shell by this time. An occasional shot came from a doorway here and there.

Not a shot had yet come from anywhere behind the jail. The quiet back there was tantalizing. Any number of the men below wanted to make a break for it when Morgan climbed a ladder inside the office and cautiously eased himself up on the roof. Ace Tucker and Jack Katy were downing all arguments, and there were

any number of others to take sides with them even when words grew hot.

Keeping below the curbing of the roof, Morgan studied the knolls, the flats and dry ravines. For a long time he could not see a thing that even hinted of a man, then something flashed in the lowering sunlight like a tiny mirror. That flash came from the nickel-plated butt of a Colt, and later he caught the glimpse of a rifle's barrel in the brush. When he went back down the ladder his face wore a thin, hard smile.

"Here, a couple of yuh fellas," he told them, "there's a little job to do, if yuh won't mind. Slip out to the stables an' start monkeyin' with them big back doors. Nobody'll take a shot at yuh if yuh don't try to make a streak for it. Act like yuh're gettin' things ready for all of us to make a quick rush for it. That whole place back there is full of men, an' we want to make 'em think they're smart."

"An' how," growled one of the men who had been wanting to make a rush out the back way, "are yuh goin' to try to slip through 'em when yuh do start to leave here?"

"Straight through the middle of 'em," Morgan announced flatly. "Right up the street, maybe, an' right through the town. That's the only way scallywag stags ever get through a line—when some have brains enough to bust through instead of goin' where yuh aim for 'em to go. Catch the point?"

"No!" sneered one of the men as the two turned away. "A hail of lead's the only damn thing I see to catch in a rush like that, an' I'm man enough to tell yuh I ain't the fool to try it."

"Yuh're still yore own boss, gents."

He turned away, but he was soon sorry he had let those two men out of his sight. Saddling horses in the stables, they were suddenly slamming out the back door and riding for it. Morgan had gone back to the roof. Up there he squatted, silent, frowning and troubled. Those men were mounted on good horses and seemed to be skimming over the ground, both riders crouched low in their saddles. It was no surprise to Morgan to see them go right on through without a hand being lifted to stop them, and when he scrambled back below others were now wanting to go.

"The afternoon's goin' fast," growled a big Texan. "Dark'll come in two or three hours, an' the crowd can move up close."

"Wish I'd gone with 'em," mumbled a tall, one-eyed old Utahan. "This damned town would be behind me by this time. An' another thing." He swung about to face Morgan with his hands clenched into fists. "Yuh said from the start yuh was nobody's boss. Yuh said it not long ago. What in hell's it to yuh if we want to take a chance?"

"What yuh do is yore own business, yeah," nodded Morgan. "Two men got through. Yuh saw that, but two men ain't the rest of us. They could afford to let them men get through. They're waitin' for bigger an' tougher game down there, an' they ain't givin' their hidin' places away by openin' up on small fry."

"Then, by Gawd, we're goin'!" snarled the Utahan. "Who's got guts in this crowd an' who ain't? Who's ridin'?"

One after another, eight men glanced nervously from the right to the left before they stepped forward. All of them were armed, some with their own weapons, which they had found hanging on the wall in the office, others with weapons taken from Big Oak Tanner's gun-lockers. All the other men lined up solidly behind Morgan. A quick row started, but Morgan was quick to silence it.

"Let 'em go, folks!" He held up his hands like a parson in a pulpit. "We'll try to cover yuh with rifles."

"But, damn it," snarled Ace Tucker, "this is what's called mutiny in some places, Lance. I've read about it in books."

"Me, now," intoned Morgan, "I wouldn't know. I ain't never read many books."

"Come on!" snapped the Utahan. "Let's go! If it's mutiny it's our own damn business!"



IT was forcing the issue, but Morgan never said another word about it. He sent Jack Katy and five others out to saddle horses and get everything ready for the dash of the men who were to be left behind. Leaving Ace Tucker in the

corridor of the jail, he had three men with long rifles follow him up the ladder to the roof to try to protect those who were deserting.

They had only a short wait. Yelling like Indians, the nine horsemen shot out the back of the stable. Like the others before them, they kept low in their saddles.

But nine men were not two men. There was the big Texan streaking it off just in the lead. He had taken the sheriff's horse; lying low over the saddle, flying mane whipping his face, it might have been Big Oak Tanner himself on that steel dust gelding. The man was even dressed somewhat like Tanner, and it was this man who caught the first sudden blaze of gunfire raging up from the ravines. He straightened, hands gripped to his heart. For a few rods he rode stiff in his saddle, and then he was coming down, a sprawling figure in the dust. The Steeldust horse fell just beyond him.

Morgan and the three men with him on the roof were shooting like wild men. A man climbed half over the rim of a ravine, let go and slid back; then a second and third. The cold, deadly eyes behind the sights of that rifle Morgan was using never missed a man.

It was hell down there while it lasted. Morgan saw a second, a third and a fourth man let go and drop. The Utahan was in the lead now, long figure rocking and reeling in his saddle, nasty old mouth yelling, big .45's throwing lead from each hand. He kept in the fore, swinging in behind a knoll, with only three riders left behind him. Even the horses the others were riding were shot down.

Two of the downed men managed to stumble to their feet in the clouds of dust. They were crying something in loud, terror-ridden voices and holding up their hands as a sign of surrender. Hails of bullets tore them off their feet, and then mobs of horsemen were streaking out of the brush, pushing hard on the trail of the tall Utahan and the three men with him.

"Back below!" hissed Morgan. "We've done all we can!"

* * *

"There they come, Pa! God, just watch them come!"

Long Alec Skinner's voice was like a wail of terror behind the broad front window of the bank. His face was white and strained.

The thundering drum of fast-hammering hoofs was in the air. Yells tore out of throats straining almost to the point of bursting. A whirlwind volley of shots sounded, some from the stores and houses along the street, other great bursts from the mad swarm of riders that had come flying out of the high gate of the old corral behind the jail.

"Look at 'im, Pa!" Long Alec's voice was like a woman's panic-stricken scream. "God, what a man on a horse! Look, look, look! He's standing straight in the saddle!"

Anse Skinner took one look at that buckskinned figure on the tall white horse, then reached behind him in a drawer of the desk for a six-shooter. A swift kick shattered the plate glass window in front of him, adding its crash to the din, and then the old man was down, monkey-like head bobbing, heavy Colt cocked and ready.

Straight on came the buckskinned figure. He emptied his cap-an'-balls, holstered them, and his hands came up with a pair of Big Oak Tanner's fine six-shooters.

"Down! Down!" Anse snarled. "Behind something, you weak-brained damned fool! Trigger Jones may fail us, but I won't!"

His eyes were on the sheriff now, riding with his right wrist handcuffed to a saddlehorn and coming like hell. Tanner's hat was gone, torn off by the wind.

Up came the heavy Colt in Anse Skinner's claw of a right hand. The wicked black eyes were like licking adder tongues over the weapon's sights. He fired one shot at the buckskinned man. An oath ripped from his lips when he realized that he had missed. Both hands on the heavy Colt, he now centered the sights at Big Oak Tanner's broad chest.

Tanner saw him. Skinner could see that. For one split second sheriff and banker were staring at each other, each with a strange, fearsome expression in his face. So fascinated was Skinner that he did not see the buckskinned man whip the muzzle of a six-shooter around.

A bullet ripping through a splinter of glass in the broken window caused the old man to jerk back. He pawed the glass from his face, still keeping down and shuffling back toward the corner. When he could look up that flying cloud of hell-riding horsemen had gone on past the window.

"Damn!" half-sobbed Skinner. "I missed both of them, son! Had them dead to rights. Say, what's the matter with you?" Long legs shot him up, towering mouth open, mean little eyes jerking as if trying to push out of their deep sockets. "Speak to me, Alec!"

Long Alec was standing there, a look of awe in his face, body curved forward slightly, both hands gripping his stomach. At his feet lay a six-shooter he had dropped. He spoke, his voice a croak, his eyes set as if glued in place.

"I'm shot, Pa."

"Shot!"

"Yes, Pa." Careening like a toppling tree, body stiff, Long Alec was falling. The old man caught him in his arms. "Through the belly, Pa. The—the buck-skinned man." He hung there in the old arms, eyes still set, tongue twisting. His next words were in a croaking, far-away voice: "I'd give twenty thousand dollars—to be able—to ride—and shoot like that."

"God!" sobbed the old man as he eased him to the floor. "My boy! My boy!"



THE unexpected shock of it carried them through. That was the one thing Lance Morgan had been staking his life on. No one had expected that crowd from the jail to break straight through town. Men stared at each other, half of them believing they had just jarred themselves awake from a nightmare. When they started a rush for horses a blinding banner of dust hung over the street and seemed to gather in a swirling cloud slowly rising in the wind.

"We catch 'em before they hit Long Wall Canyon or we don't catch 'em at all!" wailed a voice. "I ain't fool enough to go on up in them Crazies after them."

Mobs tore out of town, but there were

few very brave men among them. They rode hard for three miles, the dust along the way leading them. Hearts were made heavy with slow sinking sensations when they came in sight of Long Wall Canyon and saw that the dust led straight into it. One after another the groups pulled up.

"I ain't goin' in there," announced one burly gunman. "Seven years ago, there—about, this here Lance Morgan's daddy come to town an' got a man outa jail. A bunch trailed 'im outa town, headed right into that canyon, an' hell fell on 'em from the rims. There was enough Crazy Mountain fellas on them rims to wipe out a whole army. We left eight men lyin' where they dropped, an it was three days before we got up guts enough to go back for the bodies."

When that man swung back others turned and followed him. Two of the groups sat there in their saddles, arguing for thirty minutes, and then they turned back. No one said anything about Big Oak Tanner. Big Oak could take care of himself. No man felt like getting himself shot just to help him.

Back in town, Anse Skinner sat in his chair behind the blind drawn over the window and stared at the dead man on the floor. He had closed the front door and turned the key in the lock. The door to the big vault still stood open. Shadows were gathering in the bank, and yet the old man sat and stared. Sometimes his mouth wiggled. Once a couple of tears found their way down his wrinkled cheeks. He was sitting like that when the guarded scrape of a spur sounded on the floor behind him.

Anse Skinner tried to snatch up the big Colt on the floor, but he was not quick enough. A tall, dusty figure in buckskins was smiling at him over the long barrel of a cap-an'-ball. Behind that man stood the equally dusty Big Oak Tanner, and behind Tanner stood Ace Tucker with a six-shooter's muzzle pressed firmly in the sheriff's back.

"What do you want?" The banker's voice was hoarse. "What do you mean coming in my back door after—after—"

"Yuh know what I want, Skinner." The man in buckskins spoke. "This is payday. I want thirty thousan' an' eight hundred dollars, to be plumb exact.

That'll pay for them cattle yuh bought from the Katys. I don't yet know what Big Oak wants."

"This—this is a holdup!" croaked Skinner. "And—and, damn you, it was you who killed my son!"

"Yuh shot at me." Lance Morgan grinned in his face. "An' yore son was here with yuh, liftin' up a gun. But I didn't come to argue about that Skinner. Get the money."

Skinner was prodded forward. Lance Morgan kept right at his elbow when he entered the vault. With shaking hands the old man counted out the money. Morgan thrust it into a canvas bag. When Skinner looked up Big Oak Tanner was glaring at him.

"Yuh tried to kill me, Anse!" he snarled. "I want my money now. Thirty-eight thousan' even, accordin' to a book I've got in my pocket. Yuh figured yuh would shoot me an' just keep my money. If I told all I had to tell on yuh in this town yuh would be stretching rope before that sun outside can get down behind the mountain. It was yuh who made me frame up that charge on Jack Katy. It was that thing lyin' there on the floor what shot ol' Henry Lesterbrook, damn yuh. Get my money. I'm sneakin' outa town an' lettin' nobody see me after what's been done to me today."

"Go ahead!" Lance Morgan gave the sheriff a push. "It's yore show now."

Anse Skinner whimpered as he again bent over the big cash drawer in the vault. That thirty-eight thousand dollars would just about clean out the bank. Nervous hands fumbled down among the stacks of currency. Slowly checking the old man's count, Big Oak Tanner began to thrust the money in a stout canvas sack. Skinner was the first to notice that Lance Morgan and Ace Turner were creeping noiselessly toward the back door.

"You'll have to take some out of this one, Big Oak." The banker turned to another black metal drawer. "It'll just about break the bank, what with the money I just paid out for Katy's cattle."

"I don't give a damn," snarled the sheriff, "if it breaks yore neck, yuh ol' buzzard. Yuh—yuh—" His voice clogged, choked. "Don't shoot me, Anse!"

"One of these is always kept in this drawer, Big Oak!" Skinner had swung away from the second drawer, a long black Colt suddenly in his hand. "Just for such rats as you. Now, by God, I'm going to kill you!"

"Anse!" The sheriff's eyes bugged. "Don't!"



HE MADE a savage grab for the Colt, his big hand seizing the old wrist as he drove Skinner back. In that quick, violent struggle the muzzle of the Colt was whipped around. A muffled roar shook the vault. With a groan Anse Skinner slumped to the floor.

"Damn!" hissed the sheriff as he snatched up the money sack and the second black drawer as well. "Right through the guts!"

He turned, scurrying like a shadow toward the rear door, throwing it open. His mouth fell slack, an oath forming on his lips. Trigger Jones, a short, bottle-bellied man, stood in front of him. Behind Jones were a half dozen other well-known gunmen of Cold Water.

"Somebody," began Jones, "said they thought they saw that fella in buckskin come in here. . . What the hell's the matter, Anse!"

Tanner wheeled in a panic. There stood Skinner, old lips dribbling blood. Beyond Skinner, men attracted by the sound of the shot had pushed aside the shade over the broken window and were climbing into the bank.

"Big Oak," gasped the banker, dying on his feet, "was robbing the bank."

"That's a lie!" roared the sheriff.

But even as Big Oak Tanner yelled Anse Skinner was sliding to the floor with a diabolical smile on his face. Then men were surging up, pouring in from all directions.

So terrorized that he did not know what he was doing, Tanner tried to drive forward. A Colt in the hands of Trigger Jones jarred twice against the pit of his stomach. Then the crowd was swarming over him, yelling for his blood.

And the buckskinned man was safe on his way back to his mountain.

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February Issue on Sale Christmas Eve

The good padre of Santa Paula Mission knew the Palos Verdes hills held sudden, silent death, but he was damned if he'd hire the strange gringo Robin Hood, Juan Poker, to take the church's gold to Monterrey!



There have been home-burnings and mass plunderings.

JUAN POKER'S PILGRIMAGE

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

FATHER CHAMACO was a round, smallish man with full red cheeks and weak eyes. Under the swelling folds of his frock was a body which gave sagging evidence of the thousand feasts at the rich ranchos of the Palos Verdes Valley to which the president of the Mission Santa Paula Del Montana had been in-

vited. The days of labor in the 'dobe pits, of fighting in a hostile land, of drudgery, were done.

Even the Gran Señor, Bishop of Mexico, knew that the good friars of Santa Paula had come upon lush days—that the Indians were docile, the fields fertile, and life good under the warm California sun

which blessed the sprawling mission at the heart of the Palos Verdes.

But a kind life in his later years had not softened the Padre Chamaco. His pudgy, softened hands yet knew how to fashion a keystone arch and his pride how to deal with a lawless man who did not honor his God.

Standing in the doorway of the Riata Saloon, that fresh and festering foreign scar on the face of the little town huddled under Santa Paula's buttressed walls, he stared stonily at the lank, villainous Yankee who faced him. A tall man with eyes of flint, a face of granite, and a body of use-polished steel—an evil man with an evil reputation.

The good padre puffed out his cheeks and sucked them in again with an angry sound. These westward-straggling Yankees, baited by the gold of the hills, were devils, even if some of them were of the faith. Behind him, in the Riata, lay one of them for whom he had only now administered the last rites and who would shortly be dead of his gunshot wound.

"You are a godless wretch, Juan Poker," Padre Chamaco said in solid judgment. "A murderer, a highwayman—without a soul. You have grave need of me, but I have none of you. I'll not speak to you here. Step aside and come where the curtain of the confessional may hang between us. Then I will listen. Only then!"

The tall Yankee grinned and stepped aside obligingly. But as the padre passed him, the man's voice reached out in gentle, gibing protest.

"You ride for Monterrey tomorrow. You should have company, Father!"

The padre pulled up, looked hastily about him, and stepped into the alleyway beside the Riata. A churchman's curse on the long ears and sharp noses of these hard-eyed gringos! No secret had ever been more closely guarded within the walls of Santa Paula than the purpose of this trip to the coast. An honest fear was heavy in Father Chamaco's heart as he beckoned to the smiling man on the walk.

"I heard you were a fat-bellied fool, Padre," the tall man said. "It isn't so. Maybe you aren't stubborn, either. You'll lose your gold tomorrow unless you do what I tell you."

Father Chamaco's round face tightened until the point of a strong jaw, usually hidden in the sag of his cheeks, made a straight line from his ear to his mouth.

"And that is?"

The tall man leaned forward. "Don't ask me why. And don't ask how I'll do it. But let me take it through."

The good padre's color deepened. He chuckled scornfully.



"THE Indians are my people. The *Californios* are my own blood. And I take with me two brothers of the order who are equal to all the Yankee thieves in the hills. I am too old a man to take for a guard that Juan Poker, that Long John Poker, as his Yankee brothers call him, who has the nerve to kill a man over the pasteboard evil of a game of cards in a drinking house in one minute and to offer himself with touching loyalty to the church in the next minute to guard a sack of gold from Santa Paula's chests.

"Listen to me, Juan Poker. This gold must be in Monterrey by the day after tomorrow. It is the blood of a hundred friars who have served with me inside those walls above us. In Monterrey it will bring fresh blood to a failing government—it will buy us strength to stand against the wolves who run our hills, to keep justice and peace and honor in the Palos Verdes.

"I would die to deliver that gold. I would bring down the walls of Santa Paula about my ears and go out among the savages again with empty hands. But I will take no risk of Yankee treachery and I will deliver Santa Paula's offering myself!"

The tall man shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't waste tears on the gent in the Riata, Father," he said drily. "Besides being a clumsy cheat at marking cards and a whining loser, he has the bad luck to be named Thurm Bracken. And if you don't know, Ace Bracken, his brother, has boasted he'll take all the gold of the Californias back to the States on a jack-train fifty miles long—before snow flies! And what's more, he's kept up with his boast, this far. The northern counties are clean. There have been home-burnings

and mass plunderings. Thurm being here means Ace's crew has worked this far south and he's ready to start through your valley. What I know about the mission gold, he's bound to know, too. Talk travels fast in these hills when gold's in the air!"

The Padre Chamaco shook his head stubbornly. The tall man shrugged again and turned back toward the walk.

"I am a busy man, too, Father. I have a bone to pick with the Brackens. But it can wait. One day's as good as the next to me. It would break your mission's back if it lost its gold and Father Chamaco, all in one sitting. I'd think of that!"

The padre shook his head.

"The rancheros of the back country love soft talk. The heads of their daughters can be turned by a gringo tongue. Save your scheming for them. I am an old man, weary of the world and its wickedness. I'll not be tricked nor threatened. I make you no promise of violence. Such is unseemly in a man of my order. But I, who raised her walls and saw her come to wealth, will carry Santa Paula's gold to the governor at Monterrey. Go back to the hills, Juan Poker. The dogs of the Palos Verdes have teeth. . . ."

Later, in his cell back of the mission garden, the Padre Chamaco was proud of his strong words. They had been worthy of one who was both an ardent *Californio* and a fighting churchman. They would bear repeating in his next report to the office of the bishopric. That was courage! This Juan Poker was, as the Yankees twisted the mother tongue, a very bad hombre. Queer tales followed him through the hills. And like all such gossip, facts to stand up with them were scarce. No man had seen this Juan at thieving. None who had been unjustly injured by him had ever straggled into the mission. But it was known the man neither mined nor traded nor sold his hire. Therefore, with the strong logic of a practical man, the padre reasoned the only way Juan Poker might fill his belly in the hills was by the devilry some legend laid at his door. That other tales told of evil men who died suddenly, of rich gifts among the needy, and a ready warrior who came when a battle was all but lost, Father Chamaco dismissed. Yankees were incapable of such generosity.

Schemer, thief, killer of men; whatever manner of creature this Juan might be, he could guess again if he thought himself master of the brotherhood at Santa Paula. It was a grave misfortune that he had come by knowledge of the minted freight consigned to Monterrey. But men who have built a pleasant land from the mud of a desert are not helpless. Crossing to his door, the padre sent his voice rolling down a corridor.

"Raquel! Mauricio!"

From opposite ends of the block of cells, two great figures hurried toward him. He held open his door, let them come into his room.

"Raquel, the mules. Mauricio, the gold. And three stout sticks from the woodpile. We leave tonight!"

Wordlessly, the two tall brothers whom he had often called in his reports the very pillars which upheld Santa Paula's roof, left him. They made no sound, changed no expression. In days gone by it had been a vexation to Father Chamaco that these two, more of his own vigorous kidney than any of the rest, had taken in youth the impressive vow of silence. Tonight he was glad. Explanation was a process the padre disliked extremely. Yes indeed.

His boots on, a knit sweater around his belly against the night air, Padre Chamaco met his pair at the lower end of the garden. Raquel clutched three long spade handles in one hand. They looked harmless in the moonlight, more supports for weary men than weapons. Yet there was in the memory of the padre certain times when the three of them gathered here had gone out with such staves against a whole company of refractory Indians and the following morning received the entire tribe, broken heads and all, in baptism. They were three well practised in working together and set out on a sworn errand to Monterrey. Legend, Yankee devilry and all, Juan Poker was but one man. A smile touched the padre's face. Tomorrow night the governor would certainly set a good table before them for the trials of their journey. He chuckled openly. Mauricio and Raquel turned wooden faces toward him, nodded. As one man they swung to the backs of their fat mules and turned quietly out the gate of Santa Paula.

PALOS VERDES, for all its wealth, was not a wide valley. The hours passed, and in time the coastal range lifted before them. In the first canyon of these mountains, looking behind them in prudence rather than fear, Father Chamaco saw the single mounted man on their trail. Twice in the next half hour he saw the man again, drawing closer. Just under an hour he signaled the two with him, grunted at Mauricio to cover the saddlebags of gold with his frock, and pulled up. He was waiting, flanked by two silent giants who gripped their cudgels carelessly, when the Yankee rode up to them with his strange smile.

"It's no good, Father," Juan Poker said. "It's as far to Monterrey by night as by day. You couldn't expect to fool me by this. I told you about your gold. You've been stubborn. Now you'll give it to me!"

The Yankee had ridden in confidently, so that he was shoulder to the padre's mule, now, almost exactly between the two silent brothers of Santa Paula. For a moment Father Chamaco permitted himself the common pleasure of dalliance.

"You think very little of men of the cloth, Juan Poker!"

The Yankee shook his head tolerantly. "No. I think a lot of 'em. But they're no match for the men the gold they carry brings out of the hills to the trail they ride!"

"You make a mistake, my son!" Father Chamaco breathed with triumphant gentleness. Mauricio and Raquel caught his signal. There was the rustle of rough garmenting, the sharp whistle of cudgels ably and swiftly swung. He murmured a hasty prayer that his two from Santa Paula had not forgotten their own strength and the damage a stout stick could do to a man. There must not be the stain of blood on an errand of the church.

But the Yankee was not downed. True, he had been hit, glancingly. True, also, that he had tilted out of his saddle on one side. But somehow, in excitement, the animal under him had wheeled in the proper direction and with amazing speed, so that Juan Poker rode away from them down the trail, clinging to one side of his horse as it was said the Indians of the great plains did under attack.

For a moment Padre Chamaco wondered at the great luck of this thieving Yankee. Then an anger rose in him, for he knew Juan Poker had been faster than the frocked giants beside him, that he had dodged away untouched, and that he would be back.

Thereafter a certain grimness rode with the good father, and an uneasiness he could not wholly ignore. One heard from the *paisanos* that Juan Poker was a man who was more than a man, but one did not believe all one heard. Yet the man had no fear of the blood of his brothers and there was a lot of gold in Mauricio's saddle bags.

However, for nearly the balance of the night, the Yankee made no further trouble. Twice Padre Chamaco stopped on pretense of resting the mules, each time in fact to listen for the hoofs of a horse behind them on the trail. But each time he heard nothing. Either Juan Poker had been unwilling to face the three from Santa Paula, or he was the devil's own tracker, stopping his horse each time the mules stopped. As time went on, Father Chamaco began to feel better. It took a certain godless fearlessness to rob men of the church. It was possible even such a man as Poker had thought better of it. But it was a vain hope. The good father soon found that out.

At a sharp turn in the course of the pass, where three men could not ride abreast, a masked figure slid from shadow. Starlight was cold along the barrel of a low-held rifle. The friars of Santa Paula were caught wholly without guard. Reasonable men could expect that if they were pursued, attack would come from the rear as it had before. This Juan Poker was a devil, in truth, circling stealthily past them to block their way in this fashion.

The good Father Chamaco exploded in an oath fit for stubborn mules and treacherous Yankees. And this time he didn't sit idly, waiting for the sticks of Raquel and Mauricio to do their work. He jerked his mule sideways, flinging himself from its back with astonishing force. At the same time, he whipped his stick up, around, and back down in the full swing of a man who has cut his tithe of grain with a scythe in his time. His voice roared

against the walls in sharp command to the two silent giants behind him.

"Back! Ride back!"

The rifle in the hands of the man in the trail fired hastily. Its lead powdered a ledge yards above the trail. And the padre's stave caught the masked man where his neck joined his body. The man broke as woodenly as the stave itself under the rushing impact of that blow. Up the trail a dozen yards in the darkness, a voice snapped out in sudden, angry alarm, and boots rang hastily on stone. Friar Chamaco sucked his breath in pleasurable, looked to see that Raquel and Mauricio had turned their mules and were already carrying the gold to safety. Then he swung back to face up the trail.

So Juan Poker was not the solitary man legend named him. So he was not the fearless, invincible highwayman the girls of the villages whispered over! He was a small man, small enough to bring assistance with him for the little matter of robbing a mission's gold from three unarmed and mild-natured men of the church! A snort flared Padre Chamaco's nostrils and he seized the long half of his broken stave with a grimness not untouched with pleasant anticipation. Life had been too gentle of late years in the Palos Verdes. A night like this a man could remember. And it would look well in his report to the bishopric.



THE pounding boots drew close. Father Chamaco bowed his short legs and squared himself, his stave ready. But instead of one, three men poured into the notch where he was, three men with drawn guns and savage, unmasked faces. It was not a time for thinking. It was not a time for fresh anger at the ruthlessness of a man who would rob a whole people of their chance at justice by taking the gold hoarded in their name by the padres of Santa Paula. It was a time for swift and certain action by a man too many spans about the girth to be longer agile.

Yet Father Chamaco did what he could, and he did it with amazing speed. Bending almost double and close to the ground, he was under the first stab of fire which

leaped from the guns bearing down on him. As he bent, he flung the now hopelessly useless length of his shattered stave like a clumsy Indian spear. It went true, flying between the piston legs of the first of the charging trio. In the narrow pass of the notch, it tripped the man, flinging him down full length. The second and the third running man piled on top of the leader in a tumbled heap which fought frantically for its feet.

The padre straightened, then, wheeled, and raised the skirts of his smock to leap astride his mule. But the little animal had been hit and lay already still, a further obstacle in the pass. Holding his skirts high and murmuring a hope his loose and comfortable *huarachas* would stay on his flying feet, the president of Mission Santa Paula hurdled the carcass of the dead animal and raced back down the trail. Either Raquel or the long-geared Mauricio could easily run as swiftly as the mules. One of them would dismount and let the good padre ride. The three of them would find a likely place to wait the day and better fortune. Even awaiting daylight, there would yet be time to be in Monterrey.

However, the two silent giants of the Palos Verdes had fallen afoul of trouble of their own. Three hundred yards down the trail which wound through the pass, Father Chamaco plunged headlong into a tight knot of men which broke apart, revealing Mauricio and Raquel—and that grinning son of Satan, Juan Poker!

The Padre Chamaco was aware he yet held the skirt of his smock high, that his gnarled and knotted legs were bare to the thigh, that the thin hair which fringed his head hung awry, that his breath was heavy and his face thick with the color of haste. He saw the slow grin across the Yankee's face and knew his pride had been hurt in the devil's eyes. But an anger in him would not let the hurt through. He dropped his skirt and turned accusing eyes on the two brothers he had brought with him. Juan Poker laughed.

"Ease up, father," he said gently. "Ace Bracken knows this is the only pass. He'll not follow you. He'll wait above. And father, *que hombre!* Ace sets a good ambush. You're the first man I ever saw run away from him, and I've seen his work a time or two before this!"

The padre flung an unmistakable glance of command at the two brothers of Santa Paula and leaped on the grinning Yankee before him. Juan Poker was a man of steel and speed. Father Chamaco could feel the man's body tense, swing, and flow into lashing, muscled movement. He reached for his gun, jerking it up and cutting downward with it. The padre stepped aside this calculated blow, caught the gun-arm, and brought his round belled weight against the wrist. The Yankee grunted, swore softly, but was helpless. Slowly the arm bent, and in a moment Raquel lifted the weapon from fingers which could no longer hold it. The padre freed the man before him, then. Poker straightened, backed a step, with a queer look of blended anger and admiration on his face.

But the next moment, where Father Chamaco expected a converted sinner's expression of error and repentance, he received, instead, the flinty fist of the Yankee, driven solidly home above the girdle of his habit. As round men will under such attack, he bent double in sharp agony. He heard the silent Mauricio grunt solidly. He saw Raquel's great bulk seized, wheeled, and flung flat. He heard the heavy rasp of smooth leather as the precious bags of gold were jerked free of the back of a mule. He saw the Yankee devil swing astride his own horse and pound back up the trail.



HAVING seen these things, having been forced at point of violence to realize that he had been robbed with dispatch and some skill, Father Chamaco was put to some puzzlement when he had got Mauricio and Raquel sheepishly to their feet and had made a painful quarter mile again up the gorge of the pass. At the place where he had stood off Juan Poker's men, dropping one with his stave and tripping three more; at the point where his fat mule had taken murderer's lead meant for himself, he came upon a queer scene. And in its center was that grinning Satanus of a Poker.

As was usual in a place where Poker foregathered with other men, the Yankee held a gun on the rest, sitting his saddle

with a thin, jibing grin. Facing him were four others. One of them, a man of greater bulk than either of the brothers from Santa Paula, bore a strange resemblance to a certain dying man to whom Padre Chamaco had lately administered the last sacraments in the profane walls of the Riata Saloon.

There were certain things the good padre had gathered in his mind to deliver to Juan Poker, should he ever meet the man again, but Poker gave him no chance to bring them out. He loosed a coiled rope from the horn of his saddle and flung it to the ground.

"Get a couple of turns around the wrists of these boys, Father," he ordered. "They ain't happy and they might get reckless!"

Father Chamaco lifted the rope, his anger making the bond he tied on the men facing Poker very tight indeed. The last one was tighter than the rest, for he suddenly saw that three of these were the same three who had hammered down on him when he had been in this place alone; that they were the three he had spilled when he threw his broken stave among their legs. That there was no honor among thieves, the good padre knew. But the utter ruthlessness of a man who would hire others to help his own lawless plans, and then abandon them, trussed like prisoners and without their share of the stolen gold, struck him like an additional insult.

"You'll be going on to Monterrey, Father?" Poker asked him.

"I will!" Father Chamaco said stolidly. "You have brought shame and dishonor on me and on my mission. The governor will expect us, and our gold. If I cannot take him what he expects, I cannot do less than carry my apologies!"

Long John Poker rubbed his jaw. It was a thoughtful gesture, and it was sly.

"You can do better than that, Father," he suggested drily. "These boys have horses tied in the brush over the ridge somewhere. Kick one of 'em in the shins and he'll tell you where. They're a cautious crew and likely they've got a spare with them that you can ride. You can take them in to Monterrey. The governor won't be so unhappy, then!"

"I could also give you the keys to the vaults of Santa Paula!" the padre Chamaco snapped. "But I won't! Neither

will I make prisoners of the rest of your crew so that you may desert them and make off with your spoils, alone!"

"For a preacher, Father, you're a cantankerous gent," Juan Poker protested.

"Preacher!" Father Chamaco's round face turned black with helpless rage and his hands waved jerkily. Juan Poker hooked one of his long legs over the horn of his saddle, his grin widening.

"I've been riding you, Father. I reckon I oughtn't," he said. "But you're so confounded stubborn! Look, these boys never rode with me. Long John Poker always rides alone. I told you at Santa Paula that Ace Bracken was coming this way. But you wouldn't listen. I've got a notion the governor at Monterrey will be almost as happy to see the Bracken crew tied nose to crupper like this than he would your gold. They're bad business in these hills!"

Father Chamaco's pudgy hands stopped waving suddenly. His little eyes moved from one to the other of the pinioned men before him. He looked up at the long man in the saddle above him. Luck of the saints! This *would* make a capital report to the bishop! The Bracken crew! Not every day could a servant of God be also a servant of the State. A band of desperadoes! What a banquet the governor would serve because of this. He could see it now. And as for the gold—it was a sizeable sum. But the Palos Verdes was a wealthy valley and would soon produce a like amount for the coming battle of the courts with the encroaching Yankee land-grabbers.

A man of the cloth, no more than a layman, should ask more of fate than she willing gives to him. The beginnings of a small smile creased the sag of his cheeks. This Juan Poker bore some small touch of grace. What he took from a man, he repaid in usable coin. In truth, both the governor and the bishop would be pleased at this night's work. Leaning forward, he took up the loose end of the rope which bound the four members of the Bracken crew together and pulled heavily on it, starting up the trail.

Juan Poker urged his horse ahead, riding abreast of the Padre Chamaco for a moment.

"**F**OLKS in the Palos Verdes valley are happy. They think a lot of the fathers of Santa Paula and they think a lot of their land. They haven't seen much of the gold-hunters. We'll see they don't, Father, you and me. Eh? And, Father, the road's clear from here on in to Monterrey. So's you'll believe me the next time I give you a warning. You better take these saddlebags. They're too heavy for the riding John Poker has to do!"

The Yankee chuckled, tossed down the bags from Santa Paula. Mauricio caught them in one great hand, grinned widely, and settled them in front of him across the back of the mule.

The Padre Chamaco felt shame. He felt embarrassment. Both of these went ill with the dignity of a mission president. He thought of words. But it was Poker who spoke them.

"Vaya con Dios, padres."

"Go with God," the Yankee had said in the gentle Spanish of the highlands. It was the gesture and the voice of a man who did much good in his own fashion for the same people in whose name Jose Chamaco had dedicated a lifetime of labor. The padre felt a kinship of spirit with this tall and smiling man.

"Pax vobiscum!" he said in stilted Latin.

"Peace be with you!" A kindly sentiment, but a foolish thing to say when so much more was on his lips! However, it seemed sufficient. Long John Poker reined up his horse, wheeled the animal, and hammered back down the trail. Watching him go, the Padre Chamaco shrugged. If those words were not sufficient, let Juan Poker come harried in the night to the gates of Santa Paula. What treatment would await him. What a banquet would be served for him. And what better way is there for a man to measure the gratitude of his hosts than the meal they set before him?

The padre shrugged. Now, the governor. After this night and this double offering, if the whole of Monterrey did not exert itself to the limit on behalf of the brothers from Santa Paula, he, Friar Jose Chamaco, would protest to the bishop, himself, in his next letter. . . .

PELTS AND BLOOD FOR

A stirring novelette of the fur frontier

By **HARRY F. OLMSTED**



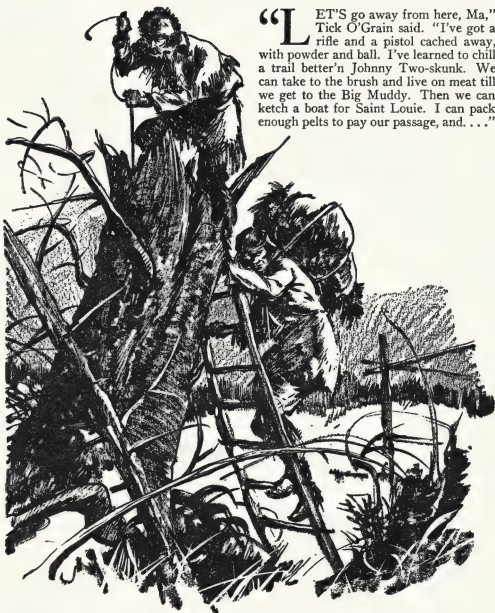
One by one, the furs were handed up to Gord and dropped below.

WILDERNESS KINGS

CHAPTER ONE

Wolf Shadow

"LET'S go away from here, Ma," Tick O'Grain said. "I've got a rifle and a pistol cached away, with powder and ball. I've learned to chill a trail better'n Johnny Two-skunk. We can take to the brush and live on meat till we get to the Big Muddy. Then we can ketch a boat for Saint Louie. I can pack enough pelts to pay our passage, and. . ."



Would an orphaned 16-year-old wilderness whelp lead the law to the cache where a fortune in furs lay buried, knowing full well that his only reward for being honest would be a hangman's knot?

Milly O'Grain's sunken eyes grew filmy with tears as she hugged the boy to her. "Don't ever tempt me again, Tick," she scolded. "You'll understand what I mean when you get married. You see, son, I married Gord O'Grain. If I leave him, it makes me a coward. I shall stay with him, but you—well, let your experience here guide you when you think of marriage. One must be very, very sure."

"Some day," Tick muttered darkly, "that man will hit you once too often and I'll kill him!"

"Hush, son!" Her frail hand went over his lips. "Listen."

From outside, faint against the sighing of the pines and spruces, and the muted murmur of Roaring River, came an alien sound. The measured *clump, clump, clump* of a paddle against the gunwale of a canoe. There were voices, too.

Fear laid its hand on the pair inside the cabin. For a full minute they clung to each other, listening. Milly O'Grain was first to rouse. "Quick, son. It's your father returning. Stir up the fire. I'll put on meat and bread to warm."

Now, having made ready, they could hear the slog of moosehide shoe paces, the sound of whiskey-thick voices and a bit of a song, high-pitched and eerie:

*"Le fils du roi voyant chassant
Avec un grand fusil d'argent,
En roulant ma boule!"*

That was Moosejaw Charlie singing—a Canuck mongrel, diminutive, black and evil, quick and unpredictable as a woman, and a devil with a skinning knife. The dull undertone of talk striking through his song came from Long Gord O'Grain and the rest of his unsavory crew: blatant, laughing Whispering Grimes; Lofty Gomer, a cruel slat of a man; sneaky Mushrat Nagle; Jackpine Dirks, who smiled that endless, awful smile as he schemed. And Black Rountree, with crushing strength in his great hands and no limit to his thirst for whiskey. A bad crew. Tick trembled a little. He had good reason to be afraid.

When they broke through the windrow of trees and could see the lighted window, Long Gord sent his huge voice before him: "Hey you, in the cabin! Bringin' home company for supper. Seven hungry

men. Git on plenty grub, woman. An' you, Tick, go to the spring house an' fetch a jug uh likker."

There was to be drinking. Milly O'Grain uttered a soft little moan and Tick's heart burned as he went to the hole cut back into the cliff, where icy water dripped out of the seamed rock. Here Long Gord had a dozen jugs of likker, white corn likker with the kick of a mule. When Gord and his mates drank it, they went crazy. When they were whiskey crazy, they dealt out punishment.

When Tick came back, lugging a stone jug, the men were washing at the bench. Gord, in a boastful, arrogant mood, stood in the doorway, toweling dirt off his half-scrubbed face.

"Didn't I tell yuh," he bawled, "I'd show you a way that'd beat sloggin' through the snow, buildin' cubbies, skinnin' an' curin' peltry? Findin' that fur cache of the Western Company was a ten-strike, I'm tellin' you."

"Oui!" Moosejaw Charlie, who scorned water either inside or out, grinned. "These Western she breeng fur from two-t'ree hundred trap-line to these cache. Wan week, mebbey two-t'ree, she come the beeg pirogue to tak' fur down to Muddy Riviere, by gar. You t'ink dose feller find fur dere, hein? Ho, ho, ho."

All joined in the mirth. Milly O'Grain stood by the stove, her hand over her lips, her eyes wide and condemning on Long Gord. Just a broken-spirited, heart-sick wisp of a woman, looking at the man whose name she bore as if she could not believe such evil of one in whom she had found only evil.

"But, Gordon," she protested weakly. "That is robbery, and worse. It's looting a cache. They hang men for that."

A roar of merriment swept the rene-gades, Long Gord laughing with them, his face then suddenly changing to a black frown.

"Shut up, woman," he bellowed, "an' tend to yore skillet. Naw, we wouldn't loot a cache, not much! To hell with yore pious preachments! How'd Western get them furs? Stole 'em, if you gotta know. Took 'em off trap lines they'd crowded little fellers like us offa. When they make that cache fat enough, we'll throw a crimp into Western that'll put us on easy street

an' drive the first nail in their coffin."
"Please, Gordon, don't plan this thing.
It's wrong. It's—"

"Sometime," Gord O'Grain said with a queer twisting of the lips, "I'm goin' to snake the hide offa you, woman. Didn't you hear what I told yuh? Lay off that sky-pilot stuff! I got no time or place fer it!"



FROM just beyond the threshold, Tick had heard. He saw his mother bite her lip until the blood came. He saw the tears pop into her eyes; saw her recoil. The fear that held him silent gave way to rage. He darted inside, the heavy jug clutched in his hand, shouldered between two renegades and planted himself before Long Gord.

"You damn dog!" he shouted. "You've beat her. You've damn near worked her to death. You never done nothin' for her as long as I can remember. May God strike you dead if you don't do what she's askin'!"

"Tick!" His mother screamed it. "Don't say that."

"He's already said it," Gord bawled. "An' I'm lickin' him good. He's bin buildin' up to this for a long time now. Gimme that jug."

He lunged at Tick. The boy swerved away. "You asked for it," he said, and slammed the heavy stoneware down on Gord's toes. The big renegade howled with pain, cursing fiercely and hopping after the elusive youngster on one foot.

Tick evaded that first rush, then ducked under the big man's outstretched hands, his hard young fists thudding like pistons into that hated face. Suddenly all sense of proportion was gone. He wanted only to beat at this man, tear him, disfigure him, make him hurt and bleed—and to hell with consequences.

It could end only one way. One of Long Gord's mauling fists connected. A blaze of colored fire blotted out Tick's vision. His feet left the floor and he was sailing through space. He heard the delighted roaring of the renegades. He heard his mother's scream. Then he crashed into the wall and darkness came. . . .

When Tick came alive, he had difficulty

determining where he was. He stirred, found he was lying on a bed; he was sore in every muscle and joint. A roar of drunken song from the adjoining room brought it all back. He had attacked Gord. His jaw throbbed. His ribs pained fiercely. There was the taste of blood in his mouth.

A whimper came from beside him; that was the first he knew that his mother lay there. Even as he turned to glance at her, the first dawnlight came filtering through the window. And soon he could see. Not much . . . yet too much. He closed his eyes so he couldn't see the bloody smear that was his mother's face, the discolored eyes, the puffed lips, the trickle of blood from the nostrils. Often Long Gord had manhandled this wife of his. But this was the first time he had made good his boast to: "beat you within' a inch of yore life, if you don't bridle that preachin' tongue."

Tick's heart went cold. He laid his hand on the bruised forehead and snuggled up beside her, giving himself up to a sickness of the spirit more than the agony of his broken body. Sickness he knew would never leave him until he had paid Long Gord off.

Milly O'Grain moaned and Tick whispered, "Hush, Ma." For the floor was shaking to the heavy tread of a man. The door burst open, light from the kitchen filtered in.

"Still dead to the world, Gord." It was the voice of Jackpine Dirks, Long Gord's lieutenant. "Jest like they was when we dumped 'em. Don't reckon they're dead, do yuh?"

"To hell with 'em," the renegade leader rapped. "It's breakin' day. Mushrat, you an' Lofty throw saddles onto them cayuses. Moosejaw, wake up an' bust out another jug. We got a ride to make."

Presently they were gone, the echoes of their hoofbeats stilled. On trembling legs, Tick got up and left the house. Out in the timber a piece, he knelt at the end of a down log. From its rotten, pithy core, he drew a rifle and a pistol wrapped in a wornout dress that had been his mother's. These were the guns he had taken from a saddle, one night when the renegades slept a drunken sleep in the house. The theft had been laid to some

"scurvy, thievin' Injin passin' the house in the darkness." Tick had cared for the weapons, oiling and cleaning them at every opportunity. Something bigger than himself had told him that some day he'd need them—bad.

He took the pistol now, hid the long gun and returned to the house, barring the doors. He built a fire, heated water and sponged the face of his unconscious mother, bewildered that she didn't wake up. He mucked out the kitchen. From the spring house he fetched a slab of venison. His mother would need some strong broth to restore her strength.



A LONG about four that afternoon, Milly O'Grain woke up, with a little cry. Tick went to her, held her in his arms, telling her over and over, "They're gone, Ma. I won't let 'em back to devil us. I got a gun."

"No, son." Her voice was only a whisper. "You mustn't cross them. They'll kill you. You must go away. Go to Ben Jackling, at Camas Root Post. Stay with him, Tick, and make yourself like him. Promise."

To quiet her, Tick promised. And, three days later, he kept that promise in so far as going to Jackling was concerned. The big, square-built factor of the Camas Root Post of Western Fur and Peltry welcomed the boy, got him seated in his office at one corner of the stockade and refused to let him talk until he had sipped a small glass of sweet wine.

"Now, what's all the excitement about, young man?" he asked kindly. "Tell it slow and one word at a time."

Tick didn't tell much except that Long Gord O'Grain had punished his wife; that there seemed nothing seriously wrong—broken bones or such—but she didn't come out of it. Just lay there white and still, talking kind of crazy.

"If she don't have a doctor," the boy finished, "I'm scairt she'll die."

The face of the young factor got a little nasty. "I know O'Grain," he growled. His voice grew softer. "And I know Milly O'Grain . . . God pity her. I'm afraid, son. . . ." He got up and laid a hand on the boy's bony shoulders. "I'm afraid a

doctor won't be able to do your mother any good. Besides, there's not a doc nearer than Fort Musselshell. What doctoring is done around here, I attend to in my blundering way. Go to your mother; I'll be along directly."

Jackling came that afternoon, just as the sun went down. He drew a chair up to the bed, folded Milly O'Grain's hand in both his strong ones and talked in so fervent a way as to embarrass Tick. He talked about people Tick had never heard of, and Milly just lay there, staring at him out of wide, hurt eyes, hanging on those words. When she finally spoke, it was to tell him what a good son Tick was and how he needed the training of a good man. Silently, Tick slipped away, his eyes swimming with tears and a lump in his throat.

When Jackling came out, dusk was settling down into the woodlands. Tick halted the factor as he was untying his horse.

"How you think she is, Mister Jackling."

The big man's smile was comforting. "Fine," he said. "Just fine. She's very tired and entitled to a rest. You stand guard over her, Tick, and keep everybody away from her. That's doctor's orders. And applies to Long Gord most of all. If you feel you ain't up to it alone, come to the post. I've got a lot of help there, help that don't feel so good toward Gord O'Grain."

"Put that help to guardin' your fur caches," Tick warned. "Especially one near a boat landing."

The factor's eyes widened. "I see," he said slowly. "I think I understand. If Mister O'Grain shifts his operations from petty larceny to robbing one of our main fur caches, I can promise him quite a reception. Thanks, son. The good blood in you is beginning to cry out for a chance. I just promised your mother I'd see that you got that chance. Good night, and let me know how things turn out."

Tick watched him ride away, then dragged slowly back to the dark cabin. He was worried and nervous. He kept listening for the return of Gord and his men. He slept little. His mother seemed to sleep all the time, yet she did not sleep at all. Her closed eyes didn't fool him.

Food she spurned. Several times she had him get the dog-eared Bible she had all but worn out. He read to her. Once, after such a reading, he went out for firewood and heard her thin voice lifted in a hymn. That frightened him most of all.

The fifth day of Long Gord's absence, Milly O'Grain failed perceptibly. Tick sat by the bed, holding her hand and begging her to get well. She seemed not to hear him. Her lips were moving endlessly, sometimes praying, sometimes talking about people and things he knew nothing of. And Tick was praying too. Praying that Gord O'Grain stay away longer—a lot longer.

That night Ben Jackling came to the cabin again. This time he did not hold Milly O'Grain's hand. He did not josh and jolly her. He maintained a grim lip-ped silence as he stood vigil beside the sick bed, his forehead furrowed. Finally, after four hours, he led Tick out into the soft darkness.

"Courage, son," he said fervently, "is a priceless thing. You'll have need for it soon. Your mother suffers from that most difficult of diseases—a broken heart. No doctor can help her. You can't help her. Gord O'Grain might if he would, but he won't. You're going to lose her, Tick. Maybe soon, maybe not for some time. Keep a stiff upper lip and do what you can for her. I'll send Johnny Two-skunk over to spell you. . . ."

When he rode away it seemed to Tick that all hope rode with him. Even before Jackling had said so, Tick had known his mother was dying. He went back into the dark house, laid his hand on his mother's brow; and knew instantly that she was past caring when and if Long Gord O'Grain returned. Milly O'Grain was dead.

Tick knelt beside the bed, holding one of those thin, limp hands. He was thankful she would not have to stand Long Gord's abuse any longer. Tick remained kneeling until the fingers he held grew cold. Then he roused, went out to the down-log gun cache, carrying a shovel. For quite a while he toiled, scooping out a hole in the soft mold.

Having carried it to a safe depth, he went for his mother, crying a little at the unbelievable lightness of the body. He

wrapped her in blankets, lowered her into the grave, murmuring a prayer she had taught him. Then he filled in the soft, clean woods earth, tamping the soil down good and spending some time strewing leaves and hiding all evidence that the soil had been disturbed.

As if she had spoken to him then, from her last resting place, a voice told him to waste no time in getting down to Camas Root Post and Ben Jackling. He went hurriedly to the house and had hardly begun to sort out his effects when he heard hoofbeats in the night.

That, he thought, would be Johnny Two-skunk, loyal Blackfoot sent over by Big Ben. The sound warned a very lonely boy, then chilled him as he realized that there were many hoof echoes, and deep-toned voices. This was not Johnny Two-skunk. This was Long Gord and his renegade followers.

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Muzzle Payoff

FEAR threw Tick into a frenzy. He would have dashed blindly from the house, hoping to gain sanctuary in the dark timber, but the wires were down between his brain and his muscles. He was frozen, and he stood there trembling. They came whirling into the yard, driving a bunch of ponies before them. Tick's fright gave way to curiosity when they didn't come at once to the house. From the window, he saw them moving in the starglow. He knew then that his warning to Big Ben had gone for nothing. Long Gord had, true to his promise, looted a fur cache.

Out there, tying the ponies head to head and removing the hitches that held the peltry bales, were four men, not seven. He heard none of the deep belly laughter that characterized Whispering Grimes' every mood. There was none so tall as Lofty Gomer. Nor one so skinny and slant-shouldered as Mushrat Nagle. Tick found himself curious as to the fate of those three whom Long Gord quarreled bitterly with most of the time. His favorite was Jackpine Dirks, for his swift, active brain. After that Black Rountree, for his strength, and Moosejaw Charlie

for his trailing, scouting and stalking ability.

"Tick!" Long Gord was bawling. "Boot outa that bed an' fetch that ladder here. An' don't let no grass grow under your hoofs. Spur into it." Then, when no answer came from the dark house: "That kid's gettin' ideas, boys. I'm gonna have to lay the rawhide to him more reg'lar. Moosejaw, run them ponies deep into the timber an' scatter 'em. Jackpine, fetch the ladder an' we'll put this fur where nosey gents never will be able to find it."

Jackpine got the long ladder from against a tree close to the house. Moosejaw ran off the Indian ponies, whooping them down the valley. Black Rountree dragged a pine branch back and forth across the yard, to erase the horse tracks. Jackpine placed the ladder against a black, burned snag at one side of the yard. And Tick knew Gord had let his hand in on the secret of his private cache. That snag was hollow; inside was a ladder leading down into an underground chamber, timbered like a mine shaft.

Every bucketful of earth from that hole Tick had pulled to the top with a rope, dumped it and carried it painfully to a nearby coulee while Long Gord dug out more dirt. It had been a grueling task, yet a satisfying one for a boy. It had a wild appeal to his adventurous spirit. It was known only to Gord, Milly O'Grain and himself. The responsibility of the secret weighed heavily on him. Now it was being loaded with spoils, and. . .

One by one, the furs were handed up to Gord and dropped below. Occasionally they halted to listen. Now Long Gord laughed contentedly. "Let the ol' lady an' the boy sleep," he boomed. "What they don't know won't hurt 'em. I'll bust up this ladder so's that Tick won't be snoopin' around an' find this fur. Be just like the brat to spill his guts all over the place that we've got fur cached here."

"How you know he ain't awake, watchin' us?" Black Rountree growled.

"If he is," Gord chuckled, raising his voice, "he can hear what I'm a-sayin'. If any hint of these pelts gits out, I'll wring off his neck like I would off a fool-hen. Yeah, an' scatter his guts for the varmints to fight over. Hurry up with them bales, boys!"

THE JOB was done at last. The ladder was taken to the woodpile and chopped into kindling. The woods were full of ladders when they were needed. "Come on inside, boys," Gord said. "An' we'll drink to the four poor devils whose scalps Moosejaw's a-wearin' at his belt. Supposed to be guardin' a cache an' every mother's son of 'em sound asleep. Never got a chance to fire a shot at us. Purty soft."

"An' that little piece of luck on the way back," Jackpine gloated. "The effect of that ain't gonna hurt us none, from now on."

"I'm tellin' a man it ain't," Gord enthused. "Come on in an' I'll break out a jug uh corn likker."

"No drinkin' for me," Black Rountree declined. "Not together. There'll be hell to pay over this. Me, I'm huntin' my hole an' pullin' it in after me till it blows over."

"He's right," Jackpine agreed. "I'd as soon be skeerce when Mushrat, Lofty an' Whisperin' come back from that wild-goose chase you sent 'em on. An' you better keep outa sight too."

Long Gord's laugh was hearty as he left them and strode toward the house. "Don't worry about me, boys," he bawled. "We don't know nothin' about the lost furs, do we? An' any loose-lipped son that says so gits belly-lead fer breakfast. Drop in after a week or so an' we'll start figgerin' what's to do about marketin' these pelts."

He came on, shouting for Tick to wake up, light the lamp and fetch a jug of whiskey. But the fear sickness that had deviled Tick whenever this big man hollered at him had gone. He watched the bulky figure approach the door, and not until then did he leave his vantage at the window and slide back to the threshold of the rear door, where he paused, cold and dead as a coiled rattlesnake.

Long Gord came in, cursing his woman, and her "lazy whelp," fumbling on the table for the lamp. He thumbed a match and made a light. He turned his blood-shot eyes questioningly toward the bedroom door. Then he saw Tick. His eyes grew wide as he tried to figure out why the boy looked as he did. Gord had never seen Tick with flaming, unafraid eyes,

with lips flattened to a grim straight line, with a pistol stuck in his waistband. When at last he did find voice, he spoke in a normal tone.

"What the hell you standin' there for? What you bin up to with that gun? Where did you get it?"

"I stole it," Tick said.

"Stole it? Great cripes, you got the gall to admit to stealin', with yore mother listenin' in the next room. By hell, I oughta whale the daylights outa—"

"You ain't whalin' nobody," Tick snapped. "An' Ma can't hear me admit I stole the gun. She's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"Where you can't never get your stinkin' paws on her again. You've beat her

he lay in his covert, listening to the sounds of the night, awed by the seriousness of the thing he had done and yet filled with defiant satisfaction.

"If I'd only had the nerve to do it a long time ago," he told a wood rat that gnawed something nearby, "I'd have saved Ma the grief that killed her."

Finally a sense of responsibility stirred inside him. He must lose no time getting to the post. He must intercept old Johnny Two-skunk, for the renegades at the O'Grain cabin would not hesitate to kill him if he blundered into them. Yes, and he must tell Ben Jackling where the fur was cached.

Tick crawled out of his hiding place, stood poised, listening. No threatening

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for the last time. You've beat me for the last time."

"Yeah?" Suddenly he was the old Gord O'Grain again. "I'll show you if I can't give you the whuppin' you've bin askin' for!" He was swaying toward Tick, whipping out his pistol. But he was a bit slow. He was cocking the piece back to rap Tick alongside the head when the boy shot him.

The big renegade faltered, swayed and moaned. His gun clattered on the floor and he clapped both hands to his belly, as if thus to hold in his leaking life blood. His legs wilted and he fell. A bullet, driving through the open door, slapped the log wall within inches of Tick's head. He fired once through the door and ducked out the back, knowing Black and Jackpine would be after him.

Tick ran out into the timber, madly, blindly, bumping into trees, tripping in tangled huckleberry brush, losing himself in the deep timber. Spent at last, he pitched over a low cutbank and wedged himself into the tangle of tree roots washed bare by flood waters. And there, long after his labored breath had evened,

sound rode the light night breeze. Like a ghost, he treaded the timber aisles, coming at last to the well-worn trail to Camas Root Post. Along this he sped, feeling neither fear now nor weariness, only the extreme urgency of getting word of what had happened to kindly Ben Jackling. Big Ben was the factor, and in him lay all the power and majesty of the law.

Tick suddenly remembered to what lengths Jackling had gone to discourage murder along the traplines and in the drinking places. He shuddered. Three men had been hung before hundreds of onlookers on the trading ground within the Camas Root Post stockade. They had slain a post *engage* and had stolen some furs.

Suppose, thought Tick, Big Ben deemed that he had murdered Long Gord? The running boy plowed to a stop, the breath whistling from his lungs. He couldn't convince him that the killing of O'Grain was justified. It *was* murder! He had taken the law in his own hands, something Big Ben had always detested.

Tick felt his throat and again thought of those three men dangling from the post

gibbet. His mind, under the spur now of self-preservation, was telling him he must not face Big Ben; he must get horses, load furs from Gord's cache and light out for far places.

While Tick stood there, sorely tempted, he heard the soft whicker of a pony, dead ahead. A horse meant man. Man spelled trouble. He pressed back into the brush, waiting for the threat to pass. He heard the horse moving about, cropping grass. Then a moan. Heart thumping, Tick slid toward the sound, hardly knowing why he disobeyed his instinct to run. It was as if someone led him by the hand.

First, Tick saw the horse. Then the man stretched in the trail. Starlight shone upon a bloodless, pain-twisted face. Shocked eyes regarded him dazedly.

"Tick, lad. Thank God." Unconsciousness took Ben Jackling then; he went limp and lay still.

CHAPTER THREE

Mark of a Trouble-Shooter

UNTIL TICK recognized Big Ben, he had fully determined to travel far from Camas Root Post. Now he couldn't. The factor was badly hurt, maybe dying. Only a skunk would repay kindness by leaving a man to die alone. With no further thought of his own troubles, Tick caught the pony, quieted it against the terror of the blood smell and tied it to a tree close to Ben.

Tick was strong and wiry, but getting Jackling into the saddle was too big an order. He could lift him, but dared not risk dropping him. He spent a bad ten or fifteen minutes before he spotted Ben's saddle rope. With that around the factor's middle and passed over a limb, he got him into the leather and roped him there. Before starting toward the post, he got water and tried desperately to rouse the man. He wanted to tell his friend what had happened, ask his advice. But it was no use.

Tick's arrival with Jackling only added to the post's excitement. After noon, shortly after Big Ben's departure, a man had ridden in from the east. A cadaverous man with chill gray eyes, downcurving lips and a rapacious scimitar nose.

This was Shane Battrick, trouble-shooter for Western Fur and Peltry, down from Musselshell Post to check Jackling's complaint that the O'Grain renegades were interfering with Company business.

"If Jackling can't handle the job," Battrick had announced to one and all, "an' if he can't run the business and hamstring the renegades, I'll replace him." The people of the post didn't think a hell of a lot of that. Big Ben was popular.

These things Tick learned from Johnny Two-skunk, after Battrick had assumed command. Johnny, lodge-pole straight for all his seventy years, had skin like wrinkled leather, fiery black eyes and tireless energy.

"Him Battrick, no good," he grunted sourly. "Him stay here, everybody quit. What happen to Boss Ben?"

Tick shook his head. "Dunno, Johnny. On my way here, I found him lyin' in the trail beside his pony. If I was staying around, I'd find who shot him."

The Indian's eyes narrowed. "Where you go, huh?"

Tick swelled. "Saint Looie, eventual. Business."

"What business, huh?"

The boy flushed. "You're too nosey. Reckon Sky Morning could fix me some food? An' what's the chance of borrying a horse?"

"Me get," the Blackfoot said. "Come, we go see Sky Morning."

They found Johnny's solemn-faced wife in the kitchen. She brightened at sight of Tick. "Baby," she cried, and held him at arm's length. "You skinny as a wolf in year of no-rabbits. O'Grain not let you eat plenty. You stay here; I feed you."

"Just some grub to sling across my shoulder," Tick said. "I'm on my way to Saint Looie."

The Indian woman touched his head, marveling at the miracle of growth in this child she had ushered into the world, as mid-wife to Tick's mother. She said sadly, "I think you most tall as your father. Soon be more taller. Your mother? Boss Ben say she very sick. She better now, eh?"

Under her sympathy, Tick's emotions cracked. He lowered his face to hide the tears, murmured "dead" and shook with silent sobs. Sky Morning held him tight-

ly against her until the spell had passed.

Johnny Two-skunk snorted, "Where life, there death too. Bird Song go to Great Spirit. Her boy want food and pony. I get pony and you pack heap food."

He strode out and Sky Morning set about packing boiled meat and fresh-baked bread in a tow sack. Finishing, she rigged a sling and was handing it to Tick when Shane Battrick came into the room. His chill eyes bored Tick; his mouth was drawn down suspiciously.

"Ben Jackling," he said, "is all shot to hell. You say you found him in the trail. Where were you when he was shot?"

"At home—the O'Grain place." Tick's eyes glittered.

"So, you admit knowin' when he was shot. How far away were you?"

"I don't know, exactly. Three-four miles, mebby."

"Out of gunshot. How'd you know where to find him?"

"I didn't. I was—"

"Denyin' it now, eh? Gord O'Grain killed Jackling. Why the hell don't you admit it."

Gord? Tick doubted Big Ben had bled there long enough for Gord to have done it. "No," he said. "Not Gord O'Grain."

"Bah!" Battrick spat. "That's how these lousy renegades survive. One lies an' the others swear to it. This time, my sweet young fur thief, you're up against real trouble. I'm here to see you all hung, for killing our four men at Bear River Cache. Your only chance is to tell where I can trap the others and where the furs are."

Tick knew he should tell, but his wariness cautioned to withhold the information. This man, once told, would forget his promise. Having recovered the furs, he would hang them all.

"I'll tell you nothing," Tick said, his eyes hard.

"Won't, eh?" Battrick suddenly punched Tick in the mouth and knocked him down on the floor. Sky Morning screamed in Blackfoot; Johnny Two-skunk came in, his hand on his knife.

"Don't stand there glowerin', you lousy gut-eater," Battrick snarled. "Pick him up an' carry him to a cell. I'll show you how to handle these renegades."

IT CRACKED Tick up. He cursed Battrick and fought Jimmy, despite the Indian's whispered caution to bide his time. And when the gaunt man-hunter locked him behind strong iron bars, he grasped them hysterically.

"You fool!" he screamed after Battrick. "You crazy dangled ol' fool! You'll never get Gord because I killed him! Killed him, you hear me? I shot his guts out!"

Tick raged himself into utter exhaustion, and fell asleep on the filthy pine-needle tick in one corner. When he awoke it was early morning, with a pale half moon shining in through the barred window. He was hungry and a little frightened. He thought of Shane Battrick, and shuddered.

He sat up, peering through the gloom. The jail was empty except for him. A jail that had echoed to the curses of reckless, embittered men gallows-bound; to the wailed pleas of cowards afraid to die the death they had decreed for others. Here had lain men stripped and bloody from a session at the whipping post. Indians, whites, guilty men and innocent men. A forgotten legion passing in review.

Under the spell of the place, Tick found himself unable to sleep. And when night's gloom was giving way to the gray of daybreak, he heard horseback riders return to the post. A few moments later a whisper sounded under the barred window. It was Johnny Two-skunk.

"You will soon have food, son of Bird Song," he whispered. "I would have brought it before, but Battrick had the door locked. He returns now, with four bodies across the pack horses. A hard one to handle, young one, but not proof against a good knife thrust."

"Four bodies?" A chill struck Tick. "Who—"

"I will go see." When Johnny came back, he too reflected the virus of excitement. "He is a wolf, this Battrick. Already he has more than half of the renegades—Gord O'Grain, Jackpine, Black Rountree and Moosejaw Charlie. He take Indians along, but they not talk. Scart. After while mebby I learn from Boss Ben—"

"Ben?" Tick gasped. "Then he's not dead?"

"Dead? No. He will get well, now that

Sky Morning had chance to nurse him. Me not tell him about you yet. Byemby Johnny tell him, then. Me go now; here come Battrick."

Comforted in the knowledge that Big Ben was alive and in a way to recover, Tick faced the grim, trail-wearied man-hunter with something of a swagger.

"I reckon," he sneered, "you'll be goin' around tellin' how you killed Gord O'Grain, makin' a hero of yourself. Like you told me Ben Jackling was dead. The truth ain't in you."

Battrick hunkered down before the cell, after locking the outside door. He rammed a charge into a stubby pipe and lit it.

"No," he said at length, "I've no desire to claim the killing of O'Grain or Jackpine Dirks. And I would much rather have taken Rountree and Moosejaw Charlie alive, so they could have been hung. As it is, their deaths will be mixed up in men's minds with the revolution staged inside the gang. A smell of big profits always draws out the buzzard in a man. It did in Black Rountree. He saw his chance to kill O'Grain and Jackpine Dirks and take over."

"And they call you a trouble-shooter," Tick taunted. "You never was wronger."

Unflustered, Battrick nodded. "I know what you're going to say, and I give you credit for trying. O'Grain's brutality resulted in your mother's death. You tried to kill him as he came into the house. But you held a pea-shooter and Rountree, out in the yard, held a rifle. His bullet broke O'Grain's back. When Jackpine whirled on Rountree, he got a pistol bullet in the guts."

"Rountree lived long enough after our shootin' match to tell me that. But nothing of the furs, or where they sent Mush-rat Nagle, Lofty Gomer and Whispering Grimes to cut them out of the profits. I'm depending on you for that information. Be honest with me and I'll do what I can to get you out of the mess you're in."

"I don't know," Tick said doggedly. He was thinking about the absence of Mush-rat, Lofty and Whispering.

"An' wouldn't tell if you did, eh?" Battrick snarled, getting to his feet. "All right. Lay in there an' starve. You get hungry enough and you'll be glad to talk."

Tick could not sleep. Hours fled and the night chill numbed him. A faint sound brought him off the bed, listening. A key turned a lock. A door hinge squealed faintly. There was a slither of moccasins.

"Son of Bird Song. Boss Ben, he want you."

Johnny Two-skunk opened the cell door and hurried Tick out. Hugging shadow, they reached the river bank, slid down.

Tick said, "Where's Big Ben now?" "Not talk," Johnny said.

Silently they followed the bank, parted heavy brush and crawled into a fox den that turned out to be a tunnel, dank and stale. It led to a rock-walled shaft, where they climbed a ladder. A horizontal door admitted them into a black stuffiness, where walls pressed in.

"Now we go," Johnny said. He opened a door, leading Tick toward light along a threshold. In that lighted room, Ben Jackling lay in bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

True to Pattern

"**S**ORRY TICK, it had to be like this." Big Ben's voice was weak. "I let you out to let you know I hadn't forgotten you. If—" his face grew pensive—"if I only had strength to face Battrick on my feet."

"He says I'm a renegade," Tick said. "Aims to hang me. Can he?"

"Not when I'm healthy," Ben said. "He's headstrong and officious; honest, I guess, but over-zealous. Sit and let's talk a while before Johnny takes you to a hide-away until I'm up and around. My wounds? Ran into Gord and his men. They left me for dead. But how about your mother? Dead, eh? I'm sorry. Tell me about it."

Finding it a relief to talk, Tick told of the hell of Milly O'Grain's last days. And, in turn, was told a chapter in her life well kept from Tick, lest it drive a wedge between him and O'Grain. Milly Rossiter had come to Camas Root, with Tick and his father, Damon Rossiter, a man just sent out as a new factor. His canoe was caught on the river in a smashing storm. His body was not recovered. Prostrated with grief, lonely, faced with

return to the east, his widow fell easy prey to the dashing, handsome trapper, Gord O'Grain—his songs and his blarney, his love-making and promises. She married him.

"Gord went from bad to worse," Jackling concluded. "He went after bigger, faster profits, and I've never caught him with the goods. Battrick wasn't so particular. Battrick must be watched and. . . ." He fell silent.

Battrick stood in the doorway, gaunt, smiling coldly, deadily. "How interesting," he hummed. "The factor lets my prisoner loose, one of a gang he's complained about. Jackling, that's connivin' with renegades."

"That's a lie!" Tick blazed.

"Steady!" Big Ben warned. "Battrick, how'd you find your way here?"

It flattered the trouble-shooter. "By keeping my eyes peeled, Jackling. A man's always under suspicion in my book till he's proved himself. You're mushy an' soft-hearted. I figured you'd let the boy out. I didn't interfere, preferring to follow and listen. Simple, eh? This means your discharge, Jackling, maybe worse."

"That's as may be," Big Ben said.

"What's next?"

"Put the boy behind bars, of course, an' keep you both close till I hear from headquarters. You're both guilty as dogs. You, Jackling, went to O'Grain's to tip the renegades off to the Bear River cache. You an' Gord quarreled over the split, him denyin' you part of the split of them he side-tracked."

"Interesting," Big Ben said wearily.

"You laid tongue to O'Grain, an' he followed to ambush you. O'Grain's woman tried to talk him out of it, being sweet on you, an' he man-handled her. While him an' his men were gone, she died. The boy buried her by the down-log, back in the thick timber, went back to the house and waited for O'Grain to return. He had a pistol and aimed to kill Gord. When Gord opened the door, the boy shot him, not knowing that Jack-pine Dirks had killed Gord at practically the same instant with a rifle bullet and then dropped Black Rountree in the yard. Later, Dirks murdered Moosejaw Charlie, and if I hadn't heard the shot and finished Dirks, I have no doubt he'd have mur-

dered this boy, leaving nobody for him to split the stolen peltry with. Am I right, my beardless young renegade?"

It awed Tick to hear this man reconstruct what had happened. He was wrong, terribly wrong about Jackling. But otherwise his judgment was uncanny.

"No, you're *not* right," Tick said. "Gord an' his men didn't leave the house after Ben Jackling left. They didn't get home until long after he had left. There was no quarrel between 'em about any split, 'cause Big Ben hated 'em as bad as I did. He don't know nothin' about the stole furs. Fact is, I'm the only one livin' now that does know where they're at. An' I'm not talkin'."

"You know, Tick?" Big Ben was looking at him curiously. "You weren't in with them, boy. Don't tell me that."

"No, of course he wasn't," Battrick sneered. "He's a little angel with wings."

"I never done a thing in my life, with them or any other renegades." The boy grew a little hysterical. "Only way I know about them furs was by spyin' on 'em. I was aimin' to tell you where they are, Big Ben, but not now. This damn wolf will take all the credit for recoverin' 'em an' he'll hang me into the bargain. An' ruin you."

"I'll find 'em," Battrick said sourly. "An' I'll see Ben Jackling sacked an' you hung. You sure called the turn, boy. Of course, if you was to confess where you've got them furs hid, an' where I can lay my paws on them three remainin' members of the gang, I might change my mind."

"There'll be no trade made with you, Battrick," Jackling said coldly. "Tick, do you know where Nagle, Grimes and Gomer are?"

"No."

"That's good enough for me. But you *do* know where the furs are. You must take Battrick there."

Tick studied this set-up, hard. Every fibre of him cried out to refuse. But back behind his thoughts was his mother's last injunction: "*Go to Ben Jackling, a good, honest man. Make yourself like him.*"

"I—I'll take him there," he said after a long time.

"Good boy," Jackling gripped his hand. "We must do the right thing, son." He

turned a stern glance upon Battrick. "Treat him right, man. Don't abuse him or, by God, I'll break you when I get up from this bed—break you with my hands."

Battrick's chuckle was nasty. "Come on," he said.

Big Ben sent a warning after them. "Better take a party with you, Battrick. Word has gone out by moccasin telegraph. Those three renegades know they were cheated by this time, and they'll leave no stone turned to find that cache."

"Ha," Battrick snorted, "he tells me how to run my business."

When he left the Camas Root Post, a half hour later, he went alone, with only Tick to guide him.



THE MOON was down now and, riding along the rough, dark trail to the O'Grain cabin, Tick gave more and more thought to Big Ben's last warning. When Mushrat and Lofty and Whispering discovered they'd been side-tracked, they would be jubilant that they had escaped the death meted out to the others, but nonetheless intent upon laying their hands on the missing peltry.

The boy's imagination raced. He thought, not once but several times, that he heard the faint, far echoes of furtive steps along their back-trail. But, for fear of ridicule and a vast distaste of talking with Battrick about anything, he said nothing. The trouble-shooter too, riding at his flank, seemed content to remain silent. He said not so much as one word until, an hour later, they broke out of the timber and saw the O'Grain buildings lying dark under the stars.

"You better not try any shennanigans, boy," Battrick said then. "I went over this place with a fine-tooth comb. Them pelts ain't around here."

Tick rode into the O'Grain yard, and dismounted. "You think you're smart," he said bitterly. "But you ain't. The furs were here all the time, right under your nose. You missed 'em."

"This better not be a trick," Battrick said. "Where are they? Wait, walk to the house in front of me. If there's any shootin' to be done, let's get it over with."

The house proved empty. Likewise the outbuildings. And now that the trouble-shooter had posed the question for the second time, Tick's heart sank. He had hoped, when Battrick climbed the ladder to verify the cache, that he might make his escape. Only now did he remember that Gord had ordered the ladder destroyed.

"Talk up," Battrick rapped. "Where they at?"

"There, in a hole under that snag," Tick pointed sullenly. "You gotta go in by the top, but there ain't no ladder. Gord chopped it up."

Battrick jerked his pistol, rapped the snag. It gave off hollow echoes. As if that were a signal, a roaring voice came from the timber.

"That's all we want to know, boys! Shoot 'em down! Them furs is ours but we gotta kill to get 'em."

That was Whispering Grimes. A yell came from Lofty Gomer, followed by a shot. Mushrat Nagle was firing. Breath wheezed out of Shane Battrick as lead struck him. He reeled against the snag, went to his knees. A curse rasped from his lips and his gun belched. He rolled to his side then, firing with dogged determination. It was Tick's chance and, being as yet untouched, he took it. He ran like a deer, intent only on reaching the cover of the trees.

Tick ducked around the barn and leaped off into a shallow water course. Here, pressed against the bank, he paused for breath, his brain racing. The thunder of gunfire still made chaos of the night. For Tick, two evils battled out there. Forced by instinct to a choice, he favored the lesser of those evils—the outnumbered one. The grim, gutty man lying on the ground and flinging defiance and lead at his three lawless attackers.

Tick tore up the creek's sandy bed, climbed out, circled the clearing and plumped to his knees beside the rotten log where he had left the cached rifle. A sob escaped him. The log was torn to pieces, ripped apart by Battrick in his hunt for the stolen furs. Tick ran his hands frantically through the pithy debris. Again Battrick had proved that even the best hunters overlook a bet now and again. The rifle was there. And his small store of cartridges.

He could see the tall, angular form of Lofty Gomer, hunkered in deep shadow but silhouetted against the relatively lighter clearing. Tick leveled the gun. "Pitch up, Lofty," he shrieked, "or I'll kill yuh!"

"Tick!" the renegade rapped. And, thinking of past days when the boy had been the target for indiscriminate kicking around, figured it a bluff. "I want to talk to you." He turned, and starlight ran along the barrel of his shifting pistol. Tick knew what kind of talk Lofty wanted to make.

From off to one side came Whispering's bawl: "That's the button, eh? Hold him, Lofty, till I git there."

Lofty came lancing forward. His gun blared. The bullet whistled over Tick's lowered head. The boy jerked the trigger. The heavy rifle kicked his shoulder. Like a man cut off at the knees, Lofty stumbled and pitched down.

Somewhere, Mushrat was yelling. "Tallied that Western man for keeps. Now for that little traitor that sold his old man for bounty."

Tick, resting on his knees, reloaded. Was that his mother's voice, bidding him be calm? Or was it the first stirrings of the dawn winds through the pines? The boy's fingers were steady as he ran in the new cartridge. Mushrat and Whispering had joined now and were out in the open.

THE END

Whispering was pointing and muttering. "He's just about in there, somewheres. You go thataway an' I'll go—"

"To hell!" came the croaked voice of Shane Battrick.

His weapon snarled. Whispering belated like a stricken bull. His legs buckled and he spread-eagled on the ground. Mushrat ripped out a string of curses, spun about and leveled his piece at the man he had believed finished. He didn't fire. Tick shot him to death.

It was over, but Tick had the presence of mind to reload before rising and hurrying into the clearing. The three dead renegades lay within a one rod circle. And somehow, to Tick, the curse of the place was lifted. Milly O'Grain could rest easy in her grave.

A sense of relief was rioting through the kid as he ran to Battrick. The man was bloody, silent, like one dead. But in him was the soft beat of a pulse, just as there had been in Big Ben, the night before. The trouble-shooter was bad hurt. Tick had to get him to the post for treatment. A renegade horse nickered from the trees. Tick went toward the sound, never doubting that it was right not to let Shane Battrick die. Big Ben would have fetched him in. And he, Tick, was trying to be like Big Ben. His mother had wanted him to be, and, by hell, he would if he died!

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It was the bombing of Cavite that brought that damn cat on board the *Perch*. We'd been a lucky submarine till then. . . . That's the way Commander Charles T. S. Gladden's—"THE CAT AND THE PERCH"—slides down the ways for a voyage through the China Sea, full of hell and Japs.

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While the fiddles played and the reels ran off to the tune of stamping feet, that long ago night in Texas—Death, too, was beating out a song of blood...

KINSMEN WERE KILLERS

by

CEDRIC · W · WINDAS ·

ORDINARILY, when darkness fell, the Clinton courthouse was an austere structure, standing aloof under the star-spangled Texas sky, as if brooding over the many sins of the malefactors who had passed beneath its portals.

But tonight was different. Tonight the sprawling adobe building glowed with lamplight from within; flickering oil-flares threw their glare over the outside walls. The building hummed with the activity of the happy crowd which jostled through its weather-stained doors. It

The two men were blasted into oblivion by the guns of James and Billy Taylor.



flung the echoes of their gay banter and laughter across the vacant lots which separated the Hall of Justice from Clinton's business houses, as if challenging saloons, hardware and mercantile stores to match its merry mood.

For tonight was the night of the DeWitt County Dance, for which auspicious occasion Judge Clay Pleasants had granted the use of the courthouse to the good citizens of the county.

Outside, each hitchrail held its overcrowded quota of droop-hipped bays and fidgety pintos. Work-worn buckboards rubbed hub-caps with gaily painted surreys. Inside, the courthouse was festooned with colored paper and red, white and blue bunting.

The festivities opened with a brief welcome by the judge. On the judge's bench, the five-piece orchestra—three fiddles, a flute and a tin whistle—started up with a lively if somewhat off-key grand march.

Rejoined by whiskey-smelling spouses, the ranchwives moved out to join the kaleidoscope of color on the dance floor, keeping a wary eye on buxom daughters lest gay-shirted Lotharios engage in too-amorous maneuverings.

Toward this scene of revelry rode Buck Taylor and Richard Chisholm, under a rising moon which cast long shadows ahead of them.

As they neared the courthouse, the sound of the music urged the riders to greater speed and they finished the last quarter mile at a gallop.

Dismounting in a swirl of dust, Chisholm flung a laughing challenge to his companion: "Betcha five bucks I get—"

A roaring gunblast drowned out wailing fiddle and warbling flute and cut the two young men down, so that neither moved nor spoke again.

For a split second, silence froze the noises of the night. Then the reverberations of the gunfire rumbled up and down the village street, and startled horses wrestled with their tie-ropes. Revelers erupted from the dance floor like swarming bees.

Darting figures swirled and scurried in the moonlight as they sought to find the cause of the disturbance; suddenly they came to the spot where death had

struck so treacherously a moment before.

The murdered men lay where they had fallen, arms flung wide, their bodies but vaguely outlined in the dense shadow cast by the brick building.

Then the crowd found its tongue, indignation swept away reverence, and angry accusations were made.

"It's Buck Taylor and young Chisholm," said one lean cattleman with a bitter oath. "I bet them buzzards, Bill Sutton and Doc White, could tell a hell of a lot about this. They quarreled with Buck about some missing cows."

A neighbor spoke grimly over his shoulder: "Yuh got any proof ter offer, mister?"

"Yuh cain't always prove what yuh know!" the cattleman retorted angrily.

He was interrupted by a third speaker who inquired bleakly, "If any other gent here assembled wants tuh make anything of it?" and hitched at his gunbelt.

"Come away, Si," said the wife of the cattleman, tugging nervously at his elbow. "Let's go back to the dance. We don't wanta quarrel with our neighbors."

But the good woman spoke too late, for already the Thing, which for want of a better name we call clan hatred, had raised its ugly head, and the DeWitt County feud was born.

Back on the dance floor the crowd was admonished by Judge Pleasants to let no thought of personal vengeance wreck the peace and security of the county. Better to let the law apprehend and punish the persons guilty of tonight's bloody deed.

Under the influence of his sound reasoning the crowd departed with half-hearted assurances of its good intentions.

The bodies of the young men were given to their kinsmen for burial. The last buckboard with its cargo of sleepy humans rolled homeward.

The judge watched their going with that serenity of poise which is the hallmark of the well-bred man; but his eyes were troubled. . . .

♦ ♦ ♦

ALREADY the rival clans were gathering and men died on lonely trails to avenge the dance night killings. James and William Sutton re-

cruited their kinsmen to full fighting strength: Billy Taylor and his sympathizers gathered their men.

They needed them, for hell was riding high, wide and handsome wherever the rivals met. Jack Helms slew Si Lawson, kin to Billy Taylor, but joined Lawson in death two days later when John Wesley Hardin rubbed Helms out.

In vain Judge Pleasants pleaded with the leaders of both factions to stay their hands. Law of the Colt was mightier than law of the courts, or so it seemed to the hot-heads of DeWitt County.

Now at this time W. J. Weisegar was sheriff of DeWitt County. A good enough peace officer from all accounts, but unsatisfactory from the Taylors' point of view because of his friendship with the Suttons. Weisegar arrested Scraps Taylor, Coots Tuggle and Mason Arnold on suspicion of cattle stealing.

Whether these men were guilty, or were victims of a frame-up has never been clearly established. Only one fact stands out, true and irrefutable, in all the hazy and conflicting statements concerning this incident. The fact that the Suttons whisked Taylor, Arnold and Tuggle from their jail cells and draped them on convenient trees in the local cemetery. There was no doubt about that.

All of which caused the Taylor clan to rise and clamor for the blood of the entire Sutton outfit. But while the Taylors clamored, the Suttons moved to press their suit against their enemies, still on the never-proven charge of rustling.

To this end they established themselves in the Clinton courthouse, and held themselves in readiness to do battle with the approaching men-at-arms under Billy and James Taylor.

To say that Judge Pleasants was outraged on thus finding his law enforcement quarters turned into a stronghold of lawlessness would be altogether too mild.

That upright and fearless gentleman rushed home, gathered a sawed-off 12-gauge and a pocketful of shells, and returned in time to see Taylor's henchmen crossing the river on their way to town and to battle.

Waiting only until the newcomers had dismounted and deployed in front of his beloved courthouse, the intrepid judge

stepped between the two tough factions.

Judge Pleasants was now the roaring lion. He stormed and intimidated, reveling with bitter invective the leaders of the clans and their followers.

He wasn't going to let any gang or gangs of rootin' tootin' outlaws muss up this clean Texas city.

He represented the Law, by God, with a capital L, and any yellow-gutted gunnie that doubted him was invited to step out into the street and see if a dose of buckshot could cure him.

The indomitable will, the utter fearlessness of the gray-bearded little jurist, won the day. Slowly, shame-facedly the Taylor hellions mounted their horses and rode meekly out of town.

The Sutton fighting men holstered their guns and left Clinton by another route.

Judge Pleasants sat on the courthouse steps, the butt of the shotgun serving as a chin rest. The light of battle had faded from his honest eyes.

"Of what use," he thought "my reverting to the mob's own tactics to overawe them? Using their own methods to gain a temporary victory? They will meet in other places and the whole grim business will start all over again."

Sure enough, the rival factions met again in full battle array, this time at Cuero, and stayed for two days bickering like school kids. At the end of forty-eight hours, not a shot having been fired, everyone went home.

But make no error; the evil thing still lived and rankled in the minds of many, so that Bill and James Sutton, seeing no peace in the future of DeWitt County, decided to sell out and move on.

James departed for West Texas and passes out of this picture permanently.

Six months later Bill Sutton found a buyer for his interests, and left with his wife and a kinsman, Gabe Slaughter, to catch a boat at Indianola.

They booked passage aboard the steamer *Clinton* and, glad to leave strife and misery of the feud behind them, walked happily up the gangplank, arm in arm, with Mrs. Sutton between the two men.

They spoke cheerfully of the peaceful days ahead; they were still discussing the prospects when the two men were blasted

into oblivion by the guns of James and Billy Taylor.

In the pandemonium which followed, the Taylors tarried only long enough to take Bill Sutton's handsomely chased Smith and Wesson, and left the scene of their crime hotly pursued by peace officers. Thus James and Billy Taylor squared the count for the slaying of their brothers, Buck and Scraps.

But the law caught up with Billy, who was sentenced to ten years at hard labor. He might have learned wisdom while making little ones out of big ones, but the Court of Appeals reversed the decision against him, contending he had killed Gabe Slaughter by mistake while endeavoring to shoot Sutton. Taylor was turned loose.

The death of Bill Sutton left no one of that name alive in the district, but his kinsmen swore to carry on until the hated Taylor clan was wiped out.

With this object in view, they closed in on a Christmas celebration near Clinton where James Taylor, Winchester Smith and Bob Hendricks were enjoying the festive season.

The trio made a dash for life and liberty through the cotton fields, but their hunters had foreseen such a possibility and had posted men in a clump of trees near the fence towards which Taylor and his companions were racing.

The chase developed into a long view halloo, with the quarry dodging and ducking as they ran.

"Come on, fellas!" panted Taylor, who, fleet of foot, was holding his pace to that of Hendricks and Smith. "Once over that fence ahead we can give them vultures the slip." Smith, stout and short-legged, was making heavy weather of it over the broken ground. "Drop yuh coat an' gunbelt, Smitty," urged Taylor. "We got plenty shells between us. Yuh'll run better without that weight!"

They raced the last few yards and literally dived over the fence, grunting with satisfaction and relief as they reached the supposed zone of safety. Taylor, nimble as a cat, was first on his feet, and in a spirit of bravado, swung around, steadying himself with both hands on the fence rail while he yelled a derisive farewell to his enemies.

He didn't understand why they had ceased firing as they ran towards him; nor why they gesticulated and roared with savage laughter. He never even heard the sudden frantic warning yelled by Hendricks and Smith. For warning, and laughter and understanding were swept away forever by the shattering of the fusillade from ambush. Smith and Hendricks died too.

But the peak of frightfulness and senseless butchery was yet to come, and, paradoxically, it was this barbarous act that recoiled upon itself and broke the feud's back.

There lived near Clinton for many years a physician whose name stood for all that was admirable in medical tradition. Doctor Philip Brazell was the typical, the ideal American country doctor. Through the heat and burden of scorching Texas days, through the long watches of many a bleak and bitter night, the Doc toiled unceasingly in the interests of his beloved community.

Rich or poor, young or old, they all looked alike to this Good Samaritan of DeWitt County. He eased their coming into the world with tenderness; he eased their going out with soothing sedatives. In the interim between their coming and going he concocted simples for teething babies, set broken bones, bandaged burned fingers.

If his patients paid, it was okay. If they couldn't pay, that was okay too, for what's a matter of a little money between friends, and in Doctor Brazell's code everybody was a friend.

All of which makes it the more incredible that tragedy should have descended upon this kindly man's household.



IT WAS ten o'clock one night. The doctor's home was in darkness, for the family was abed. Two of his sons, Theodore and Sylvanus, slept on the enclosed front porch. Inside the house, the doctor, with his wife, daughter and younger son George, slumbered peacefully, for it was one of those rare nights when the medico had not been called for service.

Out in the darkness a dog broke the stillness with a sudden clamorous chal-

lence; someone shouted "Hello, the house!" and the lads on the porch woke to ask sleepily who it was.

They sprang to lively action when a voice said "I'm the sheriff," and were getting into their clothes when a group of men pushed their way into the porch and ordered the boys to go along with them, saying they had come to search the house for a fugitive from the law.

By this time Doctor Brazell and the rest of his family were wide awake, but on his asking the reason for the disturbance was assured that no harm would befall his household.

There were eight or ten of the nocturnal visitors, and when they commanded the doctor and his three sons to accompany them, Mrs. Brazell added her demands for an explanation.

Again the men reiterated their assurance that no one would be hurt, and without so much as a goodnight to the bewildered wife and mother, faded into the night.

How long the woman stood there in agonized dread, she could never definitely say. It must have seemed like hours, and yet only a few minutes could have elapsed before she heard wild cries followed by continuous firing.

In a frenzy of fear she remained clutching her little daughter, whose childish mind sensed that something was wrong for she kept crying for her daddy and her brothers.

It was still not yet eleven by the clock, when sympathetic neighbors came to tell Mrs. Brazell that her husband and youngest son George had been slain.

Beside herself with grief, she rushed to the scene and found the doctor and her little boy George beyond all human aid. To add to her horror, Theo and Syl, her older sons, had disappeared.

Distraught, she was finally persuaded to return to her home, where to her unutterable relief, came later the two brothers. Almost incoherent from fatigue, rage and shock, the boys managed to explain clearly the movements of the raiders since

they left the house, taking the doctor and his sons with them.

Soon after leading them away, one of the ruffians had suggested killing the physician and getting the job done with.

With the words, little George had jumped in front of his father and fiercely denounced the gang, adding, "If you're gonna kill my daddy, you'll sure have to kill all of us, or we will kill you whenever we see you again."

His threat spurred the raiders to sudden anger and action, for they opened fire on their captives at once, killing Doctor Brazell and George instantly, and wounding the other brothers who, however, rushed away in the darkness and escaped.

The two survivors of this unaccountable outrage had a full list of the names of the murderers, and with their mother hurried to Clinton to invoke the law.

Neither Mrs. Brazell nor her sons could give any reason for the murderous attack. The doctor was everybody's friend; he had no known enemies in all DeWitt County.

And, believe it or not, no one to this day has been able to ascribe any explanation whatever for that barbarous slaughter.

But the widow and orphans certainly came to the right party when they told their troubles to Judge Pleasants.

He wasted no time at all. Within minutes of hearing their story he had a message on its way to the Governor of Texas, laying bare the whole pitiful tragedy and demanding the aid of the Texas Rangers to tame the wild element around Clinton.

Nor was the Governor dilatory: barely forty eight hours later there rode into Clinton twenty-seven bleak-eyed gents in white Stetsons, under the command of Lieutenant Hall.

The judge swung into instant action; he called together the grand jury and presented the evidence in the Brazell murder case. The grand jury returned indictments immediately against William Cox, Joe Sitterlee, Jake Ryan, Dave Augus-

Such famous feuds as this dramatic range vendetta stand out as unique in the rugged literature of the Frontier. In the current **STAR WESTERN**, Walt Coburn, king of cowboy authors, brings you another story of a strange badlands gun-feud, in a vigorous epic of the land-beyond-the-law—"The Killer of Rustlers' Roost." For that—and five other hard-hitting novels—buy **STAR WESTERN** today!

tine, William Meador, Charles Heissig and James Hester.

The Rangers, armed with the still-wet warrants, swung into their saddles and rode out of Clinton bound for Joe Sitterlee's farm. Night fell before they arrived and shrouded the district in gloom; but the farmhouse was ablaze with lights and dancing was in progress; for it appears that this was Sitterlee's wedding night and the ceremony had already been performed.

The lieutenant deployed his men around the house, closing every avenue of escape.



THEN he advanced alone to the scene of merriment and might have ushered himself in unannounced, but that William Meador, smoking a cigarette on the front porch, saw the officer first.

To Bill's abrupt challenge "Whatta yuh want?" Hall returned an equally abrupt answer, "Your gun."

There was tense silence for a moment, then Hall added, "Do I get it, or do I have to take it?"

Meador parried by singing out to the crowd inside: "Hi, boys! We got visitors. Lieutenant Hall and his bloody Rangers!"

The music stopped dead; the shuffle of dancing feet, the loud voices and the laughter ceased while one might count ten. Then the babel of tongues broke forth again in consternation and above the clamor Hall shouted the names of the men he wanted.

In a few moments the noise inside the house subsided again, but the Ranger could hear hoarse murmurs from within, as though the inmates were discussing a way out of their problem.

Finally one of the wanted men shouted to Hall and asked how many men he had with him.

"Twenty-seven, counting myself," replied the officer. "And you'd better come out with your hands up, because we're not foolin'."

"Only twenty-seven?" jeered the man in the house. "Hell, we got fifty! I guess we'll fight it out!"

But when those inside heard Hall's order to his men to close in and fire their shotguns through every door and window, even the bravest of the feudists lost heart. Forty-two men filed out slowly through the front door, shedding gunbelts and weapons, then keeping hands rigidly at shoulder height under the menace of the Rangers' guns.

Hall took all his prisoners back to Clinton, and in the morning brought them before Judge Pleasants, who remanded to jail all those indicted.

At the December assizes James Hester, Dave Augustine and Charles Heissig were acquitted. This was due to bare-faced corruption of the local jury, so the judge changed the venue for the others to Bexar County, where Cox, Ryan and Sitterlee were convicted of first degree murder. Meador died a natural death while awaiting trial.

The three convicted men escaped punishment through an appeal to the high courts, but the warring clans of DeWitt County had learned the lesson that it doesn't pay to tinker with a fearless judge backed by the long arm of the Texas Rangers.

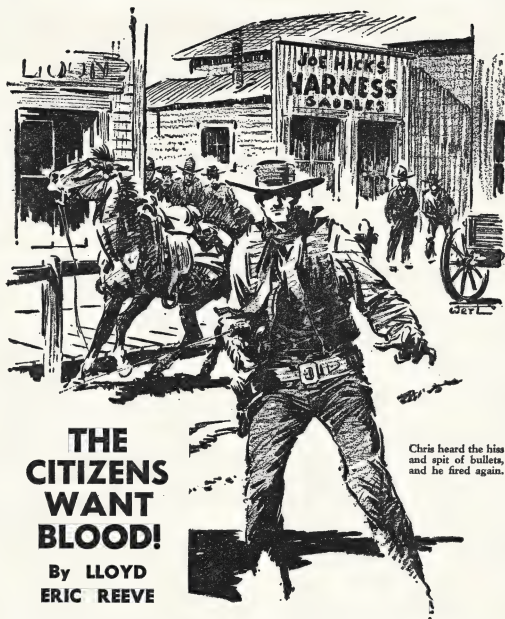
So the devastating feud, which started at a dance, ended at a dance, numbered its victims by the scores, and brought the county to the verge of ruin, faded and finally vanished as a nightmare flees the dawn.

Gone is the hatred; gone, too, the ruthlessness which spread red ruin to every far flung boundary of the county. The descendants of the clans have intermarried and live in neighborliness and peace and plenty.

Sometimes they will discuss the wild deeds of their forbears, but always with tolerance mixed with amazement that men would fight so relentlessly to so little purpose.

"But that was yesterday," they agreed. "Today is a brighter, a more enlightened day."

Tonight it is an ordinary night in Clinton. Under the star-spangled Texas sky the courthouse stands aloof and austere, as if still brooding over the many sins of the malefactors who have passed beneath its somber portals.



THE CITIZENS WANT BLOOD!

By LLOYD
ERIC REEVE

Chris heard the hiss
and spit of bullets,
and he fired again.

Another man's death would never pay for the three bleak years of exile he had spent behind bars, and Chris Tovar, home from prison, knew it. . . . Yet he had to make three men and a girl believe he meant the words of peace he spoke—and nothing but flaming sixguns could convince them!

HE left the stage at Piute Wells. He stood in the purpling Nevada dusk, a tall, lean man, looking again at that familiar place.

The same gaunt mountains flared beyond the town, the false-fronted buildings were thinly etched, crisp air was pungent with sage and piñon smoke, the usual

shaggy cow ponies stood with drooping heads at the gnawed hitchracks. Nothing had changed, and yet everything was different. It was different, he knew, because he, not it, had changed.

He went up the wooden sidewalk. He passed a couple of cowhands, nodding briefly as they stared in sudden recognition. Swinging across the long porch of the Cattleman's Hotel, he went into its lamplit gloom.

Fred Yoster, his bald head as shining as ever, looked up from behind the desk. He said, "Chris Tovar!"

Chris said, "Yes."

Yoster's face became still with thought. Then he said, "So you've come back. What's the use, Chris? What can killing him ever get you now?"

"I haven't come back to kill him."

Yoster's face became expressionless.

"All I want is a room," Chris said. "What's the matter, Fred? Your hotel too good to give a room to a cow thief?"

"I've never called you a cow thief, Chris," Yoster said. "But, Chris, what's over is over."

"Fred," Chris said, "if you ever get sent to that prison in Carson don't bother to take blankets along. You don't need 'em in hell."

Yoster looked at him. "So that's how it is."

"That's how it is," Chris said. "Except it needn't mean a fight with Dan Archer."

"The hell it needn't." Yoster spread his hands wearily, as though emptying them. "Well, it's no business of mine. Upstairs, Chris. Take any room that's empty."

Chris went upstairs and found a room. For a long time he stood at the window, watching that settling darkness. Somewhere a woman called repeatedly for a child. Cow ponies went past with quick, rhythmic cloppings. He heard a freight wagon rumbling in from the desert plains, and his sensing of the town expanded to all those vastly surrounding leagues. Strange how a place, so like a thousand others, must still become special, must pull and hold a man, just because of all the living he had once done there.

Suddenly he was weighted with all the black past, those three prison years, the loss of his brand and grass, the mark of

cow thief which old Dan Archer had put upon him. And Caroline, who was Dan Archer's daughter. Caroline who had once yielded to his arms with such quick, passionate intensity—she was the one memory he still tried to dodge, the one memory of which he was afraid.

Well, you had to let yourself be seen. You had to face whatever they thought about you. Chris Tovar swung around abruptly and went out of that room. He went out of the hotel and down the street to the Shoshone Saloon.

Here, too, was a remembered place. This sawdust floor, the sultry oil lamps, the pleasant reek of whiskey and tobacco, these ranchers, cowhands, and miners he had once known, who once had been his friends. Yet as he made his way to the bar now, he felt the sudden hush his presence had brought. A few nodded self-consciously, a couple even said, "Howdy, Chris," but the rest deliberately avoided his glance.

Standing up to the bar, he called for a drink. The bartender served him silently. A little island of empty space had grown around him. Lifting his glass, he said to the bartender, with a faint brash mocking, "A cow thief drinks alone, eh?"

The bartender looked embarrassed. He didn't answer. An instant of silence, almost sad, spread through the saloon. But then, down the bar, a voice spoke flatly. "Right," it said. "A cow thief drinks alone."

Chris tossed off his drink. Then he turned slowly and looked at the speaker. It was Ben Haigar, just as tall and darkly belligerent as Chris remembered, ever hot-tempered with that pushing, suspicious truculence of a man never quite sure of himself.

Chris said, "Always walking into things, aren't you, Ben?"

"Everybody knows why you're back," Haigar flared. "Well, I've got something to tell you."

"I'm listening," Chris said.

"I'm marrying Caroline Archer," Haigar boasted. "And I'm running cattle on the grass you used to graze. I bought it for the unpaid taxes."

Chris looked at the bartender. "Joe," he mused, "ever notice how a vulture works? Never does its own hunting.

Waits around for something else to make the kill, then flaps in to pick the bones." He looked back at Haigar. "Well?" he asked.



THERE was a soft, quick shuffling of feet as men cleared away from both Chris and Haigar. They were suddenly alone at the bar. Haigar's darkly questioning stare was fixed against the six-shooter holstered on Chris Tovar's lean flank. His claw-curved hand posed for a speculative instant above his own weapon. The black moment seemed to pull and strain, to the very edge of a bursting crash of violence. But then, curiously, Haigar suddenly controlled his quivering temper. His face went impassive.

"No," he said. "Not yet. All I want is to let you know where I stand—beside Dan Archer. You've come back to kill Dan. We all know that, and I'm telling you flat that if you push it through, if you force that shoot-out on Dan, or if he's found with a bullet in his back, I'll see you hang for it. I want everybody to hear this."

"All right," Chris said. "They've heard it."

"Well, then remember it," Haigar snapped. He turned abruptly, walked out of the saloon.

Chris was puzzled. Why had Haigar so plainly asked for trouble, and yet, when it was offered, refused it? He turned back to the bar. Behind him the easy hum of conversation picked up slowly, in that strained way of men suddenly released from a moment pitched to violence.

Chris stared at his empty whiskey glass, twirling it absently, waiting to see if any of these with whom he had once worked and joshed would saunter up to make a little friendly talk. None did. He knew it was mainly just their western aversion to mixing into another man's business, but still it hurt. Again he was alone in this little island of empty space, and he felt a kind of naked shame, and was suddenly hot with anger that a man whose conscience was clean must feel, and maybe become, just as guilty as others thought him to be.

He wheeled around, on that dry gust of anger, and walked out of the saloon. His head was reared brashly, his eyes scoffing, but that was only his mask; inside, he knew nothing but the ashy taste of a black despair.

He started up the sidewalk toward the hotel. He came abreast the lamplit office of Sard Trask, for many years sheriff of this lonely frontier county. He was not surprised to see Trask's mammoth body suddenly fill the doorway, to hear his deceptively soft voice.

"Chris, howdy, and come in," Trask said. "I'll have a word with you."

Here it was again, this implacable suspicion, this assumption of a vindictiveness he had never even felt. That black anger surged again, but he followed Trask inside. The sheriff let his huge body sag against the gun rack, pale eyes looking out from those heavy folds of flesh.

He said in that soft womanly voice, "You couldn't let go of it, could you, Chris? You couldn't put it behind you."

Chris looked disgusted. "Sard, I'm getting sick of hearing myself say this—but I haven't come back to make any fight with Dan Archer."

"No?" Trask breathed. "You figure anybody will believe that?"

"I did," Chris said. "But not now. I'm learning. You ordering me out of town, Sard?"

"I can't," Trask murmured. "You're a free man. You've served your time. But if you don't leave, Dan Archer's going to kill you or you'll kill him. Either way, you lose. Because if you kill him I've got to call it murder, and I'll see you hang."

"That's twice I've heard that tonight," Chris said.

Trask's hooded eyes flicked up. "So?"

"Ben Haigar just told me the same."

Trask scowled faintly. "Ben's going to overstep himself some time. He pushes too hard. He's like the man that was so afraid of dying that he committed suicide. Your coming back would worry him, because he's marrying Caroline Archer. Ah, Chris, get the hell out of this town. You stole some cows, got caught, served your time. It's over. What's the use coming back to it?"

"I served the time," Chris said. "But

I didn't steal the cows. Dan Archer found my brand on some of his stock. But I didn't put it there."

Trask shook his head. "You claimed all that at your trial. The court didn't believe you. You were convicted, did time, and now you've come straight back. Why? To square the account. That's the way I have to see it. It's the only way any peace officer could. Damn it, Chris, I don't want to hang you."

"Sard," Chris said, "two hours ago I might have left. But not now. I won't be hounded away."



HE walked out of that office. He went on toward the hotel, angrily pulling his lungs full of that clean, sage-tanged darkness.

The hotel loomed before him, against the stars. He stepped up on the porch.

A gun's quick crash splintered the silence. He heard a bullet strike the porch roof, and at the same time he spun instinctively out of the door's silhouetting light, felt his hand whip up his six-shooter with a queer rush of relief. The other gun flashed and banged again, and he heard again, oddly, that flat slap of the bullet against the roof.

Then he saw a figure ghosting off the far end of the porch. For just an instant he fixed it surely in the straight line of his six-shooter. He knew he held death in his hand. And yet he didn't fire. What strange impulse stayed him he didn't know; it was bewildering, this sense of being on the edge of a sin as black as Cain's. He ran forward, but already that phantom shape had joined the darkness. Then he heard the quick, hard run of a horse fading away through the night.

Fred Yoster came running to the door. Chris walked back, and they went inside. Yoster's face was weary. "So it's started," he said. "Somebody just tried to kill you, son."

"No, somebody didn't," Chris said. "That's the crazy thing about it, Fred. Whoever fired those shots wasn't twenty feet away. Couldn't have missed me unless they wanted to. But both shots hit the roof of the porch. That gun, Fred, was fired straight up."

Yoster ran a hand over his bald head. "Tried to throw a scare into you then, stampede you out of town."

"But who?" Chris asked. "Not Dan Archer. When that old mink decides to fight he rears right up on his hind feet and comes in roaring. I'll say that for him. I had some words with Ben Haigar. But this doesn't fit Haigar either. He'd shoot without sounding his rattles, but never to miss. Hell, maybe someone just thought it was Fourth of July."

"No," Sard Trask denied, from the doorway, "we got good calendars in this town."

Chris spun around. "Sard!" he said. "You'll get yourself shot spooking up behind people that way."

"I heard the shots," Trask said, "and came running. I can run when I have to. Let's see your gun, Chris."

Chris hesitated, then grinned. He handed over his gun. "No go," he said. "My gun hasn't been fired."

Sard handed back the weapon. "I figured you could have fired a couple of shots yourself, just to mess up the trail."

"What trail?" Chris asked. "Do I have to sing again about not coming back here to make a fight?"

"Your coming made it," Sard told him. "You couldn't stop it now if you wanted to. Why, you've been back less than five hours, and already you've had a run-in with Haigar, and now this."

"All right," Chris said, "but I didn't ask for it, and I still won't let it hound me out of this town."

"Ah," Trask said. "You're a fool, Chris. I don't want to hang you."

Chris grinned faintly, bitterly. "Never mind, Sard. If it comes to that, I won't hold any hard feelings. Your job's going rotten under you, Sard. A peace officer has got to believe in law and order, got to believe it's always right, or else he can't sleep nights. But sometimes you get wondering, eh? You get a little scared, I know. A man learns a lot in that prison at Carson."

Chris swung around then, went up the stairs toward his room. Below he heard Trask's soft voice lash out at Yoster: "Don't tell me he's right, Fred. If you start to say that I'll smash your teeth right down your throat."

Chris sat in the darkness in his room. Everyone believed he had come back to kill Dan Archer. He hadn't; had accepted all along that Archer fully believed him guilty, a cow thief, had even in his stubborn way been justified in pressing the charges. He hadn't come back in hatred, or even in hope of clearing his muddled name.

He'd come back because—and then suddenly, a little startled, he realized he didn't know why he had come back. He had come simply because he had to, without giving it a thought, instinctively as the migrating buffalo roll north or south in their vast seasonal tides. But why, he didn't know, or what forced him stubbornly to remain now, still to resist this black wave of human prejudice sweeping him so inevitably toward a fateful and unwanted clash with Dan Archer.

Archer, Ben Haigar, Sard Trask, those three gray years in the Carson prison—he thought of everything in his past but Caroline Archer. That one memory he still couldn't touch. Something in his mind instinctively blanked her out.



EARLY that next afternoon, he was still there, sitting stubbornly on the hotel porch, still waiting. For what, he still didn't know, held by this sense of an impending fate that was like a black, breathless silence before a shattering storm.

The quiet town breathed slowly within the vaster silence of the desert. A dog barked distantly. An occasional rider drifted past, leaving a swirl of dust doing a forlorn little dance in the center of the bleak, sunlit street. His gaze went beyond the town, to that faraway mystery of purpling mountains. Then, minutes later, some part of him became aware of footsteps approaching along the porch.

A voice said, "Well, Chris."

Even then he found it hard to turn his head, to admit to his eyes what all his senses had so long resisted. But his head came around, and he felt her actual presence break through all that reluctance like a blinding light.

She hadn't changed much. You sensed again how slim and warm and alive she

was, within the blue jeans and man's shirt. Bareheaded, her burnished copper hair was a flame in the sunlight. Her tempestuous blue eyes still struck through a man like a streak of lightning. All this he had known before. But now there was something more, as of a woman complete—compassion, pity, an almost tragic tenderness.

"Why must you do this, Chris?" she asked slowly. "What's happened to you, draining away all that once was good and decent?"

"I'm a cow thief now," Chris said. "Haven't you heard? I just finished a term in Carson prison. Your father sent me up."

"And so now," Caroline Archer said, "you've come back to kill him."

"That's what they tell me," Chris replied. "I hadn't figured it that way myself. But it seems a man isn't supposed to know his own mind around here."

"You know, that could be true," she said. "A man could intend to do something, without even admitting it to himself, just because it would make him so ashamed. I was in town last night. I saw you get off the stage. I was frightened. I thought maybe you could be warned away, but—"

He said, a little amazed, "So it was you! You got hold of a gun, figured to scare me out of town just by throwing a couple of shots over my head." It made him cold to think how close he had come to killing her, stopped only by that sudden impulse.

"Well, it didn't work," she admitted. "So I'm trying again. Oh, I suppose I'd do almost anything to keep dad from being killed. But that isn't all. I don't want Ben Haigar dragged into it. I even hate to think of you with blood on your hands. I've thought it all out. Once you wanted to marry me. Chris—would you still want to marry me?"

He stared at her. He was deeply shocked. He said slowly, "You better make this plain."

"I'm offering to marry you," she said. "No, I'm asking you to marry me."

"Just so I won't make a fight with Dan? Marry yourself off to a cow thief and jailbird?"

"Yes, I—"

"Stop it," he said angrily. "Do you think I like it, sitting here watching you drag yourself in the dust?"

But he was staring at her. He knew now that just not thinking of her had never been forgetting her. A man could remember with his senses, without ever knowing why. And now he could have her, just by letting her believe he intended to kill her father.

But he shook his head. "I say again, Caroline, I haven't come back here to make any fight with Dan."

"You can no longer help it," Caroline said bitterly. "He's already on his way in, looking for you."

Chris stared. He didn't say anything for an instant. But his thoughts went black. He was suddenly scoffing at himself for ever having believed he could avoid this violence just by refusing it.

"You know how dad is," Caroline said. "He only just heard you were back, that you'd said you'd shoot him on sight. Dad said, 'Well, I won't keep him waiting', and started for town. I took the Blue Canyon cutoff, half killed a horse to get here first. Chris, there isn't much time left. If you'll leave town now—I'll go with you."

His whole mind was clinging to one startling thing she had said. "Who," he demanded, "told Dan I said I'd shoot him on sight?"

"Ben," Caroline said. "Ben Haigar. He was only trying to warn dad."

"There it is," Chris said. "I been blind as a bat. Ben Haigar is forcing a fight between Dan and me."

"Of course he isn't," Caroline protested. "Why should he do that?"

"Four years ago," Chris said, "Ben was making a play for you. Then you told him you were marrying me. And what happens? Why, somebody starts slapping my brand on your father's cows. I get sent to Carson prison, and Haigar takes over my range, even makes himself solid with you again. But then I come back, and right off he's scared I know something, or aim to find something out. So he starts pushing, figuring if he can make me gun Dan, I'll hang, leaving him safe with everything, including you." Chris stopped suddenly, looked at her. "You don't believe a word I'm saying."

There was only pity in her eyes. "If I was to believe any of it," she said, "I'd have to believe you didn't steal dad's cattle in the first place. I'm offering to marry you. Isn't that enough?"

"No." He swung to his feet, in a suddenly weary way. "All right, Caroline. All right."

"Chris, what are you going to do?"

"Leave," he said. "Run out on it. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"You mean—take me with you?"

"I mean I'm leaving. That's all. Just leaving. I wouldn't be marrying you, not that way."

He stepped around her, took three long steps down the porch, and then he stopped. He stood looking up the street, and he said, "Too late. It took me too long to make up my mind."



A BLOCK away, Dan Archer had suddenly rounded a corner. He stepped into the street, wheeled and started toward the hotel. His shoulders were thrust truculently forward, the wiry old body weaving a little with a stubborn anger, dust squirting back from his bootheels with each deliberate step.

Some distance behind him Ben Haigar came drifting along the sidewalk. Still farther away, Sard Trask's huge bulk came watchfully from his office. They were like actors assembling for fated roles so fixed in time and tradition that nothing now could change them. With this sudden sense of inevitability, Chris felt himself walk off the porch, into the street, and wheel and wait.

Dan Archer came on. A stillness had fallen upon the town. The sunlight seemed to darken, as though a bleak shadow was flowing across the false-fronted buildings and the remote, vast back-drop of brooding mountains, in a visible coagulating of this fateful compulsion so blindly drawing these four bitter men together in a drama of blood.

When Dan Archer was a scant thirty feet away he halted. For an instant he glared silently, feet spread and solidly planted, wiry body harshly reared, those beetling gray brows and walrus mustache flared with a stubborn indignation. Back

along the sidewalk Ben Haigar skulked to a halt, and on the opposite sidewalk Sard Trask slowed his padding advance to a motionless waiting, for some strange reason not yet trying to interfere.

Caroline's voice, suddenly crying out each of their names in turn, was curiously like a bird making frantic, hopeless dashes against a cage: "Dad! Ben! Mr. Trask! Chris!" None of them, from this remote world of men into which they had withdrawn, really heard her.

Dan Archer said, almost mildly, "All right, Tovar. Any time you're ready. It was never my way to keep a man waiting." There was no great animosity in his voice, only this stubborn acceptance of a violent necessity others had decreed.

"You damn' bull-headed old mink," Chris said. "I'm still not wanting a fight with you."

Ben Haigar called out sharply, "Let him have it, Dan. He's trying to trick you off guard."

"See what I mean?" Chris said for Caroline to hear. A bleak grin shadowed his face. "Dan," he said, "you're getting scared. Just like Trask. You're no longer sure I really stole your mangy cows. You're afraid to believe you might have made that mistake. You're trying to keep this fight from falling apart right under you."

"Damn it, Tovar," the old cowman flared, "I didn't come in here for no speech-making. Get going for your gun."

"No," Chris said. He laughed suddenly. "I'm not going for my gun. See how you like that. If you're still sure I stole your cows, that I'm back just to gun you, go ahead and shoot me down in cold blood. Just see if you can do that now."

Anger flared across the old cattleman's seamed face. He made a half move toward his gun, and for just an instant Chris felt the nearness of death like a quick, cold wind. But then Dan Archer's hand became an uncertain hovering, and a curiously blank wondering shook his face. Again everything was motionless, waiting, in that flared, swollen tension.

Then Sard Trask blew out his breath, suddenly loud in that silence. "I'll be damned!" he snorted. And then he said, "All right, Chris. You've earned your chance. Remember I told you last night

about the man so afraid of dying he killed himself. Try your chips on that card if you want."

Chris caught those words, and turned them quickly in his mind, until their meaning came clear and certain, and then he handed them back to Trask. He said coolly, deliberately lying, "It's up to you, not me. I can't figure why you're waiting. You told me you were ready to arrest Haigar. You said he'd slapped my brand on some of Dan's cows as soon as he heard I was marrying Caroline, and that he's forcing this fight between Dan and me now just to keep in the clear and finish his clean-up. You got all the evidence you need. Why aren't you arresting him?"

"I am arresting him," Trask said softly. He picked it up from Chris and went on smoothly, "But I was walking on eggs with you and Dan on the edge of gunning each other." His soft voice turned suddenly on Haigar: "Ben, it's all up with you. I took my time putting it together, but I got enough now to send you up for years. Ben, you're under arrest."

Haigar had swung half around, staring blankly at the huge peace officer. Chris watched his face coldly. The whole thing was a monstrous gamble; neither Trask nor he had a shred of proof to back the bluff. Everything depended on Haigar's queer make-up, that impetuous trait of trying to push back anything he feared just by plunging wildly into it. The dark chemistry of it worked in his face now—indecision, clashing impulses, feverish uncertainty.

He blurted, "Trask, you're bluffing!"

"Am I?" Trask asked. He grinned, and his grin was cruel.

"Bluffing, just bluffing!" Haigar flared, but his voice was going a little shrill.

Chris thought, "He's cracking. It's coming."

Haigar shouted, "Bluffing! You haven't got a drop of proof! Not one drop!" His voice pitched suddenly to a scream: "All right, you got it, and I did it! But you'll never jail me! Stand still, or I'll kill you! I'm going away from here. *Stand still!*" He was crouching, his face working, and he had whipped out his gun and was holding it leveled on Trask's huge shape.

Chris said, "Just like that," and felt himself reach for his own gun.

At the same instant he sensed that Dan Archer had pivoted to glare blankly at Haigar. Dan said, "Ben, you skunk!" and his gun came up.

Haigar swiveled his weapon toward the old rancher with an instant savagery, and Chris felt his own gun leaping toward his hand, crashing flatly as the muzzle barely cleared the holster.

He missed Haigar, but the distraction was enough to make Haigar's banging weapon miss Archer, too. Haigar's gun came swiveling right around, on toward Chris, in that rolling crescendo of angry shots. Chris heard the hiss and spit of bullets, and he fired again at Haigar's hunched, fury-crazed figure. Haigar stopped shooting. His gun tilted downward, and then dropped from a suddenly limp hand. The whole body seemed to sink reluctantly, folding in on itself.

Chris holstered his gun. He felt drained, empty, bleak with a curious exhaustion. He had tried to avoid this, and hadn't been able to. It had come, because it had to come, not just as he had expected it, but still in all its bitter violence.

Only to Trask he spoke. "Sard," he said, "I was wrong about you. You're bigger than your job, big enough to make right anything you see go wrong. Well, it's over, and now I can leave this town."



IN THE dusk, only that next dusk after the one in which he had arrived, Chris Tovar stood waiting for the stage. He felt a gray resistance wash through him as Dan Archer and Caroline walked up.

"Chris," the old cowman said at once, "I figured you was guilty, so I sent you up. I played it the way I saw it. I was wrong, but I reckon my saying it now ain't much help."

"I never had any hard feelings," Chris said.

"Oh, go away, Dad," Caroline broke in. "This trouble is all mine."

The grizzled rancher hesitated, then walked bleakly away. Caroline touched Chris's arm. "I'm asking you to stay."

"You feel guilty," he said. "You figure you owe me something. That way wouldn't work either, Caroline."

He watched the stage roll up. Joe Rivers was handing an express box up to the driver. The jingling of harness and soft champing of bits sounded loud.

Caroline looked up. "Listen to me, Chris Tovar. For three years I've been trying to forget you, even by saying I'd marry another man. When I asked you to leave town today, said I'd go with you, I thought you were a cow thief, and worse. I tried to despise you, to hate you. Yet all the time something deep inside me *wanted* to go with you. It made me ashamed, but still I couldn't help it. Chris—you're humiliating me, making me say all this."

A thought came suddenly, like a blinding flash of light: "Why, this is why I had to come back. Because she *wanted* me to."

She said, "You thought I never had faith in you, because I believed you guilty. Wasn't it a greater faith to want to be with you even when I did believe you were guilty?"

A shame was in him now, for having made her stand and strip her heart this way. But he felt all the doubt and bitterness suddenly wash out of him, and his big hands reached out a little humbly. She came up against him.

After a long instant he heard a heavy rumble of wheels. He glanced over his shoulder and said, "There goes the stage. Seems I've missed it."

"No," Caroline said "you didn't miss it. You just finally caught it."



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McCoy shot him through the heart as his sixgun came out.

A hundred half-drunk gun-slingers were whooping it up, ready to kill that lawman the Arizona Kid had marked for death. The Kid, though, was damned if he would run with a coyote pack—even to square a saddlemate's murder!

WHEN A GUNMAN RODS THE LAW

THERE was no moon, but the ghostly starlight lit up the Arizona Kid's pale, girlish features as he loped the black down the trail toward Sprague City.

He pulled up on the rim of a hill as gunshots and distant yells floated up toward him. They were having a celebration of some kind in town. But the Kid wasn't particularly interested in that. He

intended to have his own celebration when he arrived. There were six slugs in the silver-handled Colt hanging at his side, and all six were for Sheriff Ed McCoy. McCoy wouldn't have much to celebrate after it was over.

A red glow hung behind a distant ridge. In Sprague City a building was burning down, or they had built a huge bonfire. The Kid spurred the black on. The Kid's face was smooth and finely chiseled; his nose was small and tilted like a girl's but his lips were thin and tight. There was murder in the Kid's pale blue eyes. In Sprague City tonight he had to kill a man!

"Morley never had a chance," Jack Scott had told the Kid, two weeks before in a small Texas border town. "This McCoy knows how to handle the hardware. McCoy has the law on his side and he pulls the first gun. He has Morley full of holes before Joe can take a deep breath."

The Kid had listened quietly. Joe Morley had been his friend, and Sheriff McCoy of Sprague City had shot Joe down. A man had a debt to pay when a friend of his was murdered.

Morley was no angel, but he and the Arizona Kid had been saddle mates. They'd pushed wet cattle across the river. In Lincoln County, New Mexico, they'd broken into a bank and lived on the profits for six months. Morley had always had a smile and a song, but now Morley was dead.

"I'm ridin' north," the Kid told Scott. "I'm seein' this McCoy."

"McCoy," Scott grinned, "is greased lightning on the draw, Kid."

The Kid laughed harshly. "I'll shoot the buttons off his shirt before he can pull his gun."

For two weeks the Kid had been riding north. The black was fagged but the Kid pushed him on. Sprague City lay a few hundred yards behind the ridge. The Kid wondered what the red glow was. There were more gunshots. So much the better. In the midst of a celebration he could settle his quarrel with McCoy, and ride out of town on a fresh horse, without interference. His conscience wouldn't bother him about it.

That red glow was from a huge bonfire, he saw, as he rode down a slope into Sprague City. He saw the outlines of the

buildings and a huge sign reflecting the light. The sign hung from the Silver Spur, Sprague's biggest gambling house. Sprague City was a cowtown bordering the trail. Uneven rows of wooden structures flanked the long, rambling street.

The entire population of Sprague City seemed to be gathered in front of the Silver Spur. The Kid could see them moving about the bonfire. He saw men lurch from drunkenness. Again gunshots cracked the night air.

The Kid tried to figure out what holiday this could be. Apparently Sprague City was having its own private celebration. Silently, the Kid rode toward the big barn behind the Silver Spur. He pushed the black among the lurching, stumbling men.

A drunk caught the bridle of the horse and leered up into the Kid's face. The Kid's small hand moved toward his silver-handled Colt.

"We're gonna hang the sheriff," the drunk babbled. "You with us, cowboy?"

The Kid moistened his thin lips. He nodded and grinned. If they were going to hang McCoy he would be the last man in the world to try to stop them—unless he himself managed to kill Big Ed before they could string him up.

The hostler in the stable helped him slide off the saddle. He looked at the black.

"You been ridin' a long way, son?" the hostler said. He was a small, chunky man with an enormous nose.

The Kid slapped the dust from his clothing. He ignored the hostler's question. "What's the fireworks for?" he asked casually.

The hostler's face hardened. He stepped closer and peered around in the shadows. "It's Stanton's work," he said. "Stanton fixed Big Ed. Ed's deputies have him locked in his own cell."

The Kid grinned. "I'm a stranger," he said. "A pilgrim. Who's Stanton?"

"Stanton owns the Silver Spur and half of Sprague City. He don't like Big Ed, because Ed plays it clean. Ed won't work for him, and last year Stanton tried to fix the election. The honest people in Sprague voted McCoy in, anyway."

"How'd McCoy get in his own jail?" the Kid asked. This was getting compli-

cated. He had come here to kill McCoy. But McCoy was in jail, and you can't kill a man when he's in jail. The Kid laughed silently.

"Stanton," the hostler snarled, "fixed the charges against Big Ed. Two days ago Ed shot up some bad man in the Silver Spur, and Stanton claims it was murder. Stanton bought off the deputies. They locked McCoy in the jailhouse. Tomorrow Stanton's going to call a meeting and decide what's to be done with McCoy."

The Kid listened to the yells and the gunshots outside. He remembered what the drunk had said. "I reckon," the Kid spoke softly, "this Stanton has other plans before morning."

The hostler nodded grimly. "Stanton's been passin' out drinks all night—free. His men have been talkin'. If somefthin' ain't done in a couple of hours that crowd is goin' to pull McCoy out of the jail and hang him on his own gallows."

In the darkness the Kid laughed. "This Stanton," he reflected, "must be quite a man."

"He runs Sprague City," the hostler snapped. "He owns this stable and he owns half the people. He loans money and folks can't pay it back. Only once has Stanton been stopped by the honest people around here. That was when he tried to run his own killer, Bat Thomas, as sheriff. McCoy won the election, and Stanton hasn't forgotten it. He knows McCoy is out to break him, so he had to get to McCoy first."

The Kid nodded. Quietly, he left the stable and walked through the crowd. The light from the bonfire lit up his smooth features. He was of medium size and frail-looking. Under his blue silk shirt, wiry muscles rippled. His gun was slung low on his thigh. Those who thought to remark on the girlish features remained silent when they saw his pale blue eyes.



THE Silver Spur was crowded to the doors. Men in groups were talking excitedly. Many of them were drunk. Here and there the Kid spotted the honest citizens, grim-faced, silent men with troubled eyes.

At a table in the center of the room sat

a huge, red-faced man with straight black hair. The face was oily and the eyes were dark, slanting like an Oriental's. The Kid guessed it was Stanton. His guess was confirmed a moment later when one of the men at the table called him by name.

Stanton seemed to be doing most of the talking, and the Kid caught the gist of it. Stanton said he wanted to try McCoy in the morning; he wanted to make it look legal. The charge was murder. Stanton said that, but at the same time behind Stanton's bar the three bartenders were drenched with perspiration passing the free drinks to the thirsty customers.

The Kid knew Stanton didn't want McCoy's fate to wait till morning. There was a possibility the honest citizens of Sprague might get organized by that time. Word would be carried out to the local ranches, and honest cowpunchers would ride in to combat Stanton's judgment. Stanton's game was a lynching game, and he had to play it out tonight. The Kid had seen it worked before.

The Kid pushed his way through the crowd and grabbed the drink the bartender shoved toward him. The fact that he was a stranger made no difference. All drinks were on the house and Sprague City was filled with strangers—many of them brought in by Stanton himself.

Beside Stanton stood a lean, dark-complexioned little man with a hatchet face and gray, bleak eyes. The Kid recognized the killer—Bat Thomas. The man must be Stanton's bodyguard. Bat's gun was tied to his leg, and his right hand was never more than inches from the weapon.

The gunman's bleak eyes swept the room constantly. Once they paused on the Kid as he came from the bar and sat down at a table a little distance away. The Kid met the man's stare and Bat Thomas wet his lips.

A short, pudgy man, hatless and wild-eyed, broke through the crowd near the entrance of the Silver Spur. He looked like a local shopkeeper, and he carried no gun. As he stood before Stanton the Kid saw him tremble with rage.

"You're exceeding whatever authority you have given yourself, Stanton," the little man shrilled. "You had no right to jail McCoy. We elected Big Ed and we want him freed."

Stanton's eyes narrowed till they were dark slits. He placed both hands on the table before him and studied the fat man.

"McCoy's a killer," Stanton rasped. "We intend to try him in the morning."

"There'll be no trial," the fat man said bitterly, "and you know it, Stanton. They're talkin' about breakin' into the jail already."

Stanton shrugged. "If the citizens of Sprague City want it that way, who am I to stop them?"

"They're not citizens," the fat man shrilled. "They're your gunmen, Stanton. You brought 'em here to get Big Ed."

The Kid saw Bat Thomas slide a hand down toward his gun. The Kid frowned. It was no concern of his if Stanton was out to get Big Ed. It would save him the task of killing McCoy. But pulling a gun on the fat man was a different thing. The fat man was unarmed. Secretly, the Kid admired him for standing up to the big boss the way he did.

"You better shut up, Davis," Bat Thomas said. "You got a big mouth."

The Kid moved like a panther to the side of the fat man. "He talks," the Kid said easily. "He talks till he's blue in the face if he wants to."

The fat man gasped and Bat's eyes flickered. Slowly Stanton stood up and the crowd behind Bat Thomas faded away. Inside the Silver Spur it was quiet; outside the crowd howled around the bonfire.

"For a boy," the gunman said, "you're pickin' a man-sized job."

The Kid's blue eyes penetrated the man. "Any time you want to pull your iron, Bat," he said.

As he saw Stanton edge away, the Kid gave the fat man a shove off to the left.

Bat Thomas hadn't moved from the table. He glanced down at the drink still there. Before his eyes came back to the Kid he was fishing for his gun.

The Kid's first shot ripped through Bat's shirt just above the belt. His second bored through the gunman's chest on the left side. Thomas managed to squeeze the trigger once before he died, but his slug went into the ceiling. He crumpled to the floor and the gun slipped from his limp fingers.

"Beat it," the Kid told the fat man.

The smoking gun was still in his hand. He kept an eye on Stanton. He started to back toward the door. Under his breath he swore at himself for being a fool. This was no quarrel of his. He should be on Stanton's side if Stanton was out to get McCoy. Now Stanton's gunmen would make it hot for him.

He heard the fat man's hurried steps behind him and he felt the batwing door at his back. With a jump he was outside and plunging through the crowd around the bonfire. He heard a shot fired in the Silver Spur. Glancing behind him he saw men streaming out the doors. Stanton would have the town combed in an attempt to get him.

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HE SLIPPED out beyond the light of the fire, raced down a back alley. As he climbed a low fence he felt thorns prick him. He smelled the odor of roses. Roses in Sprague City! He laughed. It was like finding ice water in hell.

There was a low porch and a railing beyond the fence. No lights showed inside the house. Probably the residents were at the Silver Spur celebrating. This ought to make a good hiding place till the furor died away.

The door was open and he slid quietly inside. He stopped abruptly. A hard cylinder was pressed against his ribs. He heard someone breathing close to him.

With a quick twist the Kid whirled and knocked the gun away. He dropped to the floor, and jerked his .45 clear. He waited for a moment on the other side of the room before shooting. He knew his assailant was unarmed because he had heard the gun clatter on the floor.

"Go ahead and shoot." The voice was bitter. It was the voice of a girl!

The Kid relaxed. A grin spread over his features. He got up off the floor. "Pardon me, ma'am," he said, "for being so rough. If you could strike a light—"

She made no movement, but as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he could make her out, standing stiff and straight in one corner. Outside, the Kid heard men running past the house. There were more gunshots.

"They're after you!" she accused.

That tickled the Kid. "Somebody's always been after me."

Quietly, the girl moved around the room pulling down the shades. The Kid heard her strike a match and he saw her bending over a lamp on the table.

She turned on him as the light from the lamp slowly flooded the room. The Kid swept off his hat. He felt his heart jump as she looked at him. He crossed the room and picked up the gun she'd dropped. He handed it to her.

"Maybe," she said, "I'll kill you."

The Kid grinned. "I reckon," he said softly, "it'll be a pleasure dyin' like that."

"Why did you come here?" she asked.

The Kid put his cards on the table. There was no reason for hiding the truth from her. "I shot up Bat Thomas at the Silver Spur," he said simply. "I reckon Stanton's mob would like to get me for it."

She nodded and he saw the bitterness in her eyes. "They have my brother, too," she said. "They want to kill him."

The Kid gulped. "McCoy?" he asked.

She nodded again. "I'm Dorothy McCoy."

The Kid whistled softly. He remembered that he still had his gun in his hand. He slid it back into the holster. "This Stanton," the Kid said, "must be a bad hombre." He wondered if she knew about the lynching party they were forming. He thought not. Most of the honest citizens of Sprague City thought Stanton would have a trial in the morning.

"When my brother gets out," Dorothy McCoy said proudly, "he'll put Stanton in his place. They caught Big Ed when he was asleep."

The Kid crossed to the window and peered out behind the shade. He saw the men around the fire. Several of Stanton's crowd were haranguing the others. The Kid came back. Less and less he liked this situation. He didn't like Stanton and he didn't like Stanton's methods. He knew he should wait and then grab a free horse and ride like hell out of town. But when he looked at the girl he knew he couldn't do that.

She was watching him closely. Absently, the Kid replaced the two spent cartridges in his gun.

"Where's the jailhouse?" he asked sud-

denly. "How many men are guarding it?"

She stared at him. "We don't want to break in. It's against the law. Tomorrow when the honest citizens come into Sprague we'll put Stanton in his place."

The Kid smiled coldly. "There'll be no tomorrow, lady," he observed, "if we don't get your brother out tonight."

He heard her gasp.

"Stanton," the Kid said plainly, "is feedin' his men drinks. They'll break into the jail tonight and lynch McCoy."

She sank down into a chair, but she didn't cry. "We have to get him out," she said quietly. "Tonight."

The Kid sat down. He rubbed his hands together. He had to think fast. He knew she was looking at him.

"I don't know you," she said finally. "Suppose this is all part of a plot against my brother. Supposing he's shot accidentally while being rescued?"

The Kid gaped at her.

"Maybe you're working with Stanton," she said bitterly. "He's brought a great many strangers into town. They've been trying to get Ed."

"I shot Bat Thomas," the Kid said. "I never should have gotten into this."

"Why did you come to Sprague City?" she asked suddenly. "What is your business here?"

As the Kid groped for words there was a pounding on the door. The Kid breathed easier. He slipped the gun from the holster again and moved behind the curtain she indicated.

A moment later the fat man from the Silver Spur was wheezing inside the room. The Kid grinned and stepped from cover.

Davis, the fat man, gaped and then held out his hand. "This man," he said to Dorothy McCoy, "saved my life."

The girl confronted Davis. "He tells me they're planning to lynch Ed. Is it true?"

Davis nodded reluctantly. "We've got to get him out."

The Kid looked at the girl's calico dress and he began to smile. "Mebbe," the Kid said softly, "you have a girl cousin, Miss Dorothy?"

Dorothy McCoy looked mystified. She shook her head. "I have no cousins."

"Tonight," the Kid told her, "one is about to be born."

THE two women left the house and proceeded up the street toward the jailhouse. Behind them the red bonfire from the Silver Spur still shot sparks up into the night. They heard the drunken yells from the men; they saw the groups around the speakers. It wouldn't be long before that mob made a concerted drive on the jail. Like the morning mist, the deputies would fade away and Ed McCoy would be strung from his own gallows.

"Hurry," Dorothy McCoy whispered. "We haven't much time."

The other girl adjusted the veil over her face. As they hurried along the street, men hooted drunkenly. Only a few men hovered around the jailhouse. Two guards with rifles sat on the top steps of the stone building.

Firmly, Dorothy McCoy went up the steps. "I want to see my brother," she said.

They looked at her and the other girl. "My cousin Sarah," Dorothy snapped.

The taller of the two guards scratched his head. "We ain't got no orders," he reflected. "Stanton didn't tell us nothin'."

The door was opened and yellow light from the inside flooded the top step. Dorothy McCoy pushed her cousin before her. The door closed behind them. At a desk sat Jeff Carter, one of Ed McCoy's former deputies. Carter, a lank, long-jawed man with green eyes, had sold out to Stanton.

Dorothy McCoy eyed the man with disgust. Across the room, Joe Dall, the other deputy, looked out the window toward the bonfire. Dall, small, rat-like, eyed them with interest. He came over and grinned at Dorothy McCoy's cousin.

"Stranger?" Dall leered. "Where you been keepin' her, Dorothy?"

The cousin turned away.

Jeff Carter stood up and a bunch of keys dangled at his waist. "I reckon you want to see your brother. Get a good look." He started forward, with the two girls following him. They went down a passage and Dall returned to the window.

Carter was inserting a key in the locked door leading to the inner compartments when the Arizona Kid slid a six-shooter from beneath the folds of his shawl—Cousin Sarah's shawl. The gun crashed against Carter's skull and the lank man slumped to the floor.

Swiftly, the Kid stepped from the dress and made his way back up the passage-way.

"Dall," he called softly.

Joe Dall spun around. His face turned gray as he looked into the yawning mouth of the six-shooter.

"Bolt the door," the Kid said quietly. "I have a bad finger. Sometimes it slips." He stepped up and flipped Dall's gun from the holster. The little rat-like man reluctantly moved to the door and slid the big bolt across.

"Up in front," the Kid ordered, and Dall walked ahead of him down the corridor. They opened the door and saw Ed McCoy behind bars in one of the three compartments. The other two were empty.

"Dorothy!" the big, broad-shouldered sheriff gasped. "What's going on?"

"Open it up," the Kid told Dall, and Dall obediently unlocked the cell. Big Ed rushed out and took the girl in his arms.

It was then that Dall made his play. His right hand flashed into his shirt and came out with a small derringer. The Kid shot him through the heart before the deputy could level the gun.

Big Ed's face showed his bewilderment.

The Kid tossed him a gun. "You'll need this, friend," he said, "before the night's over."

Distinctly, they heard the roar from the other end of the town.

"It's a hangin' party, McCoy," the Kid explained, "and you're the chief guest. They're probably on their way now. How do we get out of this calaboose?"

McCoy found himself. He shoved the gun in his belt. "Upstairs," he said. He shoved the girl in the cell and locked it. "You'll be safe there," he told her.

The roar of the crowd was much closer. "They're comin'," the Kid grinned. "What'll we do, Sheriff?"

"We have two guns," McCoy said, "and they'll both go off if we pull the triggers." The sheriff darted up a narrow stairway toward the second floor and the Kid followed on his heels.

The top floor was an old storage room and they stumbled through the darkness. A dim light showed through a small window in the rear.

"There should be some rope up here,"

McCoy said. "We can go out the back way. I have a little job to attend to."

The Kid grinned. "Stanton?" he asked.

McCoy nodded grimly.

The sheriff struck a match and they found a coil of rope. As they moved toward the window the Kid had an idea.

"Reckon," he said slowly, "you knew a man named Morley, Sheriff?"

McCoy was kicking out the window with his boot as he replied. "One of Stanton's men," the sheriff said casually. "Stanton had him pick a fight with me in the Silver Spur. Had to shoot him." McCoy turned around suddenly. "Was he your friend?"

The Kid shrugged. "*Quien sabe.*" He hauled a heavy chair over to the window, and the sheriff tied the rope to it and braced it across the framework. If Morley had signed up with Stanton's crowd and had run afoul of Ed McCoy, the sheriff had had no alternative.

♦ ♦ ♦

"YOU first," the sheriff said. "You might have to drop the last ten feet. But it's soft earth back there."

The Kid nodded and climbed out on the sill. Quickly, he lowered himself and then dropped. His body brushed that of a man running past in the darkness.

Surprised, the man opened his mouth to yell as the Kid ripped the .45 from the holster and brought it down on his head.

McCoy heard the scuffle below but couldn't see anything. "What's happened?" he called softly.

"All clear." The Kid smiled to himself.

They crept to the corner of the building and looked around. A crowd milled around the door of the jail; another group was coming up the street with a battering ram.

The Kid heard Ed McCoy chuckle. "Reckon they're in for a surprise. The coop's empty."

"What now?" the Kid asked.

"The Silver Spur," McCoy said.

They circled out behind the jailhouse, keeping always in the shadows. They heard the mob roar by on the way toward the jail.

"Stanton wouldn't be along with them,"

McCoy said grimly. "He'll stay at the Silver Spur for an alibi."

"He's smart," the Kid acknowledged.

They came around to the back of the Silver Spur. McCoy looked through one of the windows. He grinned.

"Stanton's there," the sheriff said, "with four of his henchmen."

"Five," the Kid sighed.

Ed McCoy hesitated and fished around in his pocket. He came up close to the Kid and pinned something on the Kid's shirt. It was a star.

"If you come along," Big Ed said, "it'll be legal-like. You're my deputy." He slipped the gun from his belt. "If you don't come, stranger, I'm goin' alone."

The Kid gulped. "Deputy?" he whispered. He'd come to Sprague City to kill the sheriff and now he was the sheriff's deputy—all in a matter of two hours!

Big Ed opened the door and stepped inside. The Kid was on his heels. Stanton was at the same table where the Kid had seen him earlier in the evening. The Kid knew him by his broad back and straight black hair.

One of Stanton's gunmen saw them first, standing in the doorway. The man's face blanched.

"McCoy!" he whispered.

Stanton's men whirled, but Stanton himself remained seated, presenting his back to the two men. Stanton realized he was safe as long as his back was turned.

"Just a friendly visit," McCoy said.

The four gunmen spread out carefully. Still Stanton made no move to get up.

The killer who had first seen them fished for his weapon. McCoy shot him through the heart as his sixgun came out.

"Down!" McCoy shouted as the other three went for their guns. The Kid got the second man before he fell to the floor. The other two dove for cover. McCoy kicked over a table and dropped behind it.

Stanton stood up, still with his back to them. Stanton's hands rested on a chair before him. Quite suddenly, the big man flicked the chair upward toward the single chandelier hanging above him. The Silver Spur went dark.

The Kid felt a slug graze his cheek, and blood started to ooze down from the wound. He shot once and then crawled swiftly across the floor toward the door.

From the other side of the room McCoy poured lead into the darkness. One of the gunmen yelled in pain, and the Kid heard him drop to the floor. The room went silent.

Skimming out the door, the Kid hurried around to the front of the Silver Spur. Stanton wouldn't stay with a sinking ship. He would try to make his getaway. The Kid was coming up the steps when Stanton burst through the batwing doors. Stanton's gun was in his hand. The front of the Silver Spur was lit up from the bonfire still roaring out in the middle of the road. Men could be heard shouting in the distance.

The Kid saw the fear on the big man's face as their eyes met. Stanton's mouth was open and his slanted eyes half-closed. He fell back against the wall of the building and opened fire. His first shot seared the Kid's ribs.

The Kid's gun bucked and the slug flattened Stanton against the wall. Stanton's gun was still firing as he slid down to the walk.



THE Kid skipped up the steps as the fourth gunman broke through in a desperate bid for his freedom. The Kid leveled his gun and squeezed the trigger. He heard a click on an empty cylinder. He saw the gunman's face light up as he whirled on the Kid with his own six-shooter.

The Arizona Kid smiled at Death. He lifted the gun to hurl it at the man. Then, from inside the Silver Spur, a shot rang out, and the Kid watched the gunman's thin face take on an expression of surprise and pain.

Big Ed McCoy pushed through the doors as the man crumpled to the floor.

"Thanks," the Kid grinned. He shoved new loads into his guns.

They looked down the street and saw the mob moving toward them. The sound of the shooting had turned the crowd back toward the Silver Spur. A rumor had sprung up that McCoy had escaped.

The sheriff stooped and picked up Stanton's gun. The Kid appropriated the dead

gunman's Colt and refilled it. They walked slowly out in front of the bonfire.

"There's a lot of 'em," McCoy smiled, "and only a few of us."

The Kid chuckled. "Maybe," he grinned, "there's more than you think."

The sheriff whirled and his eyes popped. Fifty men with drawn guns were coming up from the other side of the fire. Leading the squad was the fat man, Davis.

"I reckon," the Kid chuckled, "our friend has had a busy night. He's been roundin' up all the honest men in Sprague City. I didn't know you had so many, McCoy."

The honest citizens of Sprague City ranged in a semi-circle around the sheriff and the Kid. When the mob saw the reinforcements, they stopped fifty yards away.

The Kid saw the indecision on their faces. They still outnumbered the sheriff and his men by three to one, but the fifty were heavily armed.

McCoy stepped forward. "Stanton," he said coldly, "is dead. We're warnin' any of his friends in Sprague City to clear out by morning. If they're not gone by then, I reckon my deputy and I will have to lock them up." He nodded toward the Kid.

Slowly, the crowd dispersed. Most of them were drunk, but they sobered rapidly as the sheriff's words sank in. Sheriff Ed McCoy watched them go. Then, swiftly, he walked to the bonfire and picked up a burning stick and hurled it through a window on the top floor of the Silver Spur.

"I reckon," the Kid smiled, "you like bonfires, Sheriff."

Sheriff Ed McCoy looked at the Kid. "You lookin' for work, stranger?"

The Kid shook his head. "Thinkin' of makin' me a deputy?"

He shoved a hand in his pocket and he felt something hard and cold. It was the key to the cell in which Dorothy lay.

"Sprague City," McCoy said, "could use a man like you."

The Kid's fingers clutched the key. "Maybe," the Kid smiled, "it could." He turned on his heel and walked away.

Sheriff Big Ed McCoy grinned after him. "Tell her," McCoy yelled, "to make a pot of coffee. I had no supper."

Apache Lukes walked through the woods, each second nearing the hidden gold that would put him on easy street for life, but he had forgotten one thing: the mackinaw he wore was slowly killing him!



Old Shane, who had seated himself at the table, turned quickly in his chair.

APACHE LUKES' DEATH CACHE

By GUNNISON STEELE



HALF a mile from old Kirby Shane's cabin, Apache Lukes stopped and drank deeply from a whiskey bottle to fortify himself against the thing he was about to do. He would have to kill Shane, he knew that. But

before Shane died, he had to talk—and Lukes was pretty sure it would take a lot of persuasion to make the old rancher-trapper talk.

Apache Lukes pocketed the bottle, went on along the roiling little stream he'd

been following. He was a big man, powerful, with dark, cruel features. But, despite his size, he slunk through the forest with the speed and silence of one of the big tawny cats that roamed the highlands. Lukes knew that one or more of these huge cats had been trailing him, at a respectful distance, for the last mile. But that worried him little, for he knew further that, despite their savagery when cornered, they were cowardly and seldom attacked a man unless half starved.

It was a clear, cold night, with a yellow moon riding the sky. But here where the mighty pines and firs fashioned a dark roof high above, shafts of moonlight penetrated only occasionally.

Apache Lukes paused on the edge of the little clearing on the creek bank that held Kirby Shane's cabin. Light glowed in a window of the cabin and smoke curled from the chimney. Most folks considered old Kirby Shane a little queer. He raised a few cattle, trapped a little in winter, but mostly just loafed. It was rumored that Shane could live in luxury without hitting a lick of work if he wished. It was whispered that he had struck a virgin gold lode somewhere along the creek.

Old Kirby neither admitted nor denied it. He had been shadowed, cajoled, even threatened—but he always smiled blandly and refused to talk.

With Apache Lukes, however, it was more than just a rumor. Two weeks ago in a Skytooth store he had seen Kirby Shane, after making some purchases, toss half a dozen raw, gleaming nuggets onto the counter in payment. . . .

Greed stirred in Lukes' muddy eyes as he looked at the cabin. Shane had no near neighbors; Lukes' own shack, ten miles away, was the closest. It wasn't likely that he would be interrupted. He crept silently forward and looked through the window.

Kirby Shane, a gray, pot-bellied little old man, was cooking a late supper over a glowing stove. Shane loved the highlands and its denizens—all but the murderous cats—and that was the reason, folks said, that he refused to reveal the location of his hidden gold lode. He didn't want a lot of stampedeers cluttering up the landscape.

Apache Lukes left the window, skirted the shack to the front door, put his big shoulder against it and shoved. Old Shane, who had seated himself at the table, turned quickly in his chair. The expression on his seamed face didn't change as he looked at Lukes, at the gun in his hand.

He said calmly, "Howdy, Lukes. I was fixin' to eat . . . You're welcome to have a bite with me."

"Mebbe I will," Lukes said. "You do like I say, old man, and mebbly you won't get hurt."

♦ ♦ ♦

SHANE set the skillet carefully on a cool part of the stove. "You don't need a gun here. Feller needs a gun for just one thing up here—the pesky cats—and they can't come into the house. You lost, or somethin'?"

"No, I ain't lost," Apache Lukes growled. "And that innocent talk won't get you nowhere. You know blasted well what I want!"

"Reckon I do." The oldster sighed. "Funny, how such crazy ideas get started, ain't it?"

"It ain't an idea. You've found a gold lode somewhere close, Shane—I saw some of the nuggets myself—and you're goin' to tell me where it is."

"What if I won't do it?"

Apache Lukes grinned. "You'll do it, all right. Folks have been too easy with you. I don't aim to beg you to talk . . . I've got better ways."

Kirby Shane nodded. "I've heard that. If my old pard, Long John Spain, could talk, reckon he could tell about your Injun tricks."

"The cats got Long John, you know that," Lukes said quickly. "He was found up on the headwaters of the creek, torn to pieces."

"Sure, the cats got him, after you'd killed him and left him a-layin' out in the woods all covered with warm blood. When they was through there wasn't any way of provin' he'd been murdered beforehand. You hated Long John, had sworn to—"

Apache Lukes said flatly, "Shut up, damn you, or you won't get a chance to talk! But that can wait a few minutes."

I'm near starved, so get on with that grub."

Shane set the skillet back on the fire. If there was any thought of resistance, any knowledge of his peril in his mind, he gave no sign. Apache Lukes took off his heavy mackinaw and tossed it across the end of a small table. Then he drank again from the bottle and sat down in a chair.

Several times Shane reached upward to the shelf on the wall above the stove that held an array of cans and bottles. The food cooked, he carried it to the table, finally tossing Lukes' heavy coat onto a bunk.

"Funny smell in here," Lukes said, sniffing.

"Got some green pelts over there under the bunk," Shane said.

The big killer grunted, started wolfing the food. But he didn't relax his vigilance.

"No sense in you bein' so stubborn, old man," he complained. "If there's gold, there's enough for both of us, mebbey for a hundred men. You tell me where it is and I'll promise to keep my trap shut."

"No," Kirby Shane said quietly. "I ain't admittin' I know where there's gold. But if I did I wouldn't tell."

Lukes pushed back his chair, said, "You'll change your mind. Lay down on that bunk over there!"

The oldster paled a little. "What you aimin' to do?"

"I'll show you. Do like I said!"

"What if I tell you what you want to know?"

"Why, then we'd both be rich."

Shane said shrilly, "No, I won't do it! You ain't foolin' me, Lukes. If I told you, you'd kill me. You aim—"

Apache Lukes lashed out suddenly with the clubbed gun. The gun-barrel caught Shane behind the ear, knocked him to his knees, where he swayed shaking his head dazedly. Lukes seized him, dragged him to the bunk and slammed him down onto it roughly. Quickly, before the oldster recovered his senses, Lukes bound his wrists and ankles. Then he dragged the bunk, with old Shane on it, across to a spot close to the red-glowing stove.

"You'll beg for a chance to talk," Apache Lukes said.

HE took a long-bladed knife from his belt, opened the stove door, placed the tip of the blade in a bed of live coals. Kirby Shane watched, his face gray and still with dread.

"You wouldn't do that Lukes," he whispered.

Lukes sneered, "Wouldn't I? That's what your sidekick, Long John Spain, said. Sure, I done for him—he caught me robbin' one of his traps, and I had to. But before that happened, I had some fun with him. Then the cats finished it up. I'll show you!"

He took the knife from the coals, using a dirty rag so the haft wouldn't burn his own hand. He grinned, holding the glowing red knife-tip up before Shane's eyes.

"Aim to talk?"

Shane shook his head. "I—I—no, by Godfrey!"

But Kirby Shane *did* talk.

Five minutes later, he stammered, "I—I'll talk, Lukes. Ain't no gold lode worth goin' to hell for!"

Apache Lukes straightened, muddy eyes crawling with cruelty, surprised that it had been so easy. He growled, "Talk, then—and you better talk straight. Where is it?"

"Go four miles up this stream," Shane said weakly, "to where Turkey Creek empties into it. Follow Turkey a couple of miles, to where the water comes roarin' down out of a canyon. There, on a gravelly bar at the foot of the canyon, you'll find gold nuggets—all you want. Now cut me loose, like you promised!"

"Not so fast, old man," Lukes said. "How do I know you ain't lyin'?"

"I'm not lyin'. I'll go with you—"

"You'll do better than that. You'll stay right here, tied up, till I get back. If I find you've lied. . ."

Apache Lukes grabbed up his mackinaw, shrugged into it, opened the door and plunged out into the night. He went swiftly along the creek, making no effort at silence now, goaded by greedy triumph.

Lukes had gone less than a mile when he heard a twig snap in a thicket behind him. Looking back, he saw twin pinpoints of feral greenish light glow briefly before they vanished. Lukes scowled,

swore softly. Devilish brutes got on a man's nerves, slinking along behind him. And just then, far off to his left, another of the big cats howled.

Lukes quickened his pace. Even in the deep shadows he could see where the cats had scraped and ripped the boles of the trees sharpening their saberlike claws. With those claws they could tear a man to pieces. Again the fierce, hungry yowl sounded—closer, it seemed. And off to his right, Apache Lukes heard the velvety pad of big feet. Two of them, very close. . . .

Suddenly the forest seemed a sinister, unfamiliar place to Lukes. Quick panic stabbed at him. The beasts had never come so close before. He could see their greenish eyes, glaring hungrily at him, hear their padded feet, their low snarling. The wind in the tree tops sounded like grim, mocking laughter.

Lukes broke into a run. But suddenly he knew it was useless. He saw a great, tawny shape hurtle across a silvery strip of moonlight . . . in front of him. Apache Lukes stopped, terror gibbering through him. They were all about him, swift, deadly, closing in.

Apache Lukes' sudden scream was lost in the vast silence. . . .

Two days later, old Kirby Shane walked calmly into Sheriff Tom Abbot's office in Skytooth. After chatting a while, pleasantly, Shane said, "Sheriff, I'd like for

you to go out and look for Apache Lukes."

"What's Lukes done now?" the sheriff asked.

Shane told how Lukes had tied him up and tortured him into telling where his hidden gold lode was. It had taken the oldest most of two nights and a day to get loose from his bonds.

"So Lukes didn't come back, eh?" mused the tall sheriff. "Reckon he got busy rakin' up gold nuggets and forgot all about you—if you wasn't lyin' about the lode."

"I wasn't lyin'." Shane's eyes had clouded a little.

Sheriff Abbot clucked sympathetically. "Too bad he wormed it out of you. So you want me to go out and arrest Lukes, huh?"

"No," said Kirby Shane, taking an empty bottle from his pocket. "I just want you to go and find him. When Lukes came in he tossed his coat onto a table. When he wasn't lookin', I managed to sprinkle a whole bottleful of this stuff over the coat."

"What is it?" the sheriff asked curiously.

"Cat lure," Kirby Shane said grimly. "I sprinkle it over the bait I put in the traps I set for the pesky critters. It drives 'em frantic, and they can smell it a mile. They'll eat anything, dead or alive, that's got this scent on it!"

"BUTCHER McCARTHY'S BOY"

TARRED with the label of treachery that a thankless government had pinned on his dead father, young Bruce McCarthy drove his coach through mud, fire and enemy bullets to deliver his strange cargo—a man who could clear his father's good name—and destroy his own! Don't miss *Butcher McCarthy's Boy*, an action saga of the days when Texas was free, by Frank Bonham.



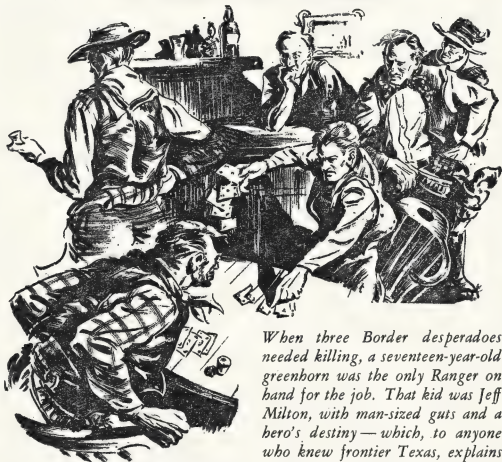
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THE BOY WHO TAMED THE BORDER

By HARRY VAN DEMARK



The Southwest, with its rustling wars, gambling killings and the like, was still wild enough for anyone.

WHEN the West was wild and the Border blazed, when the man who was fastest with a single-action Colt .45 held the law in his hand—then Jefferson Davis Milton was one of the coolest, deadliest, most highly respected gun-slinging lawmen who ever put the fear of God into a lawless frontier.

Almost any old-timer in the Southwest can tell you something about Jeff Milton's share in the taming of the Border. Jeff saw almost every phase of it—was a

When three Border desperadoes needed killing, a seventeen-year-old greenhorn was the only Ranger on hand for the job. That kid was Jeff Milton, with man-sized guts and a hero's destiny—which, to anyone who knew frontier Texas, explains why he rode back with a whole skin and a top-hand fighting man's reputation!

Texas Ranger, a member of the Customs Service, guard for the Pullman Company, United States Marshal, messenger and guard for Wells Fargo, and finally, for many years, a member of the Immigration Service.

"Milton had the swiftest reflexes, the steadiest nerves, the most accurate eye of any man I ever met," George Baylor,

Ranger Lieutenant, wrote later in his memoirs.

It wasn't long before young Jeff needed all these attributes of a top-notch gun-fighter. Word came to headquarters of a particularly atrocious slaying in the nearby cowtown of Socorro on the banks of the Rio Grande. Three rustlers were responsible.

When word of the cold-blooded killing reached Lieutenant Baylor, he found himself ill-equipped for the pursuit of the slayers. Only the day before he had sent Sergeant Gillet to the stage station at La Quadria, which was besieged by Indians. Another detachment had gone north to defend a settlement against a raiding party of Mexican Apaches. There was left at Ysleta only Baylor, two or three ailing Rangers and Jeff Milton.

Baylor said, "Well, kid, I guess it's up to you."

The youngster replied laconically, "I'll be riding!"

It wasn't a tough trail to follow. Not after the desperadoes learned who was out to get them. At first they were thoroughly insulted over having an untried seventeen-year-old kid sent after them. They were proud of their reputation as three of the toughest hombres who ever rustled a cow across the Rio Grande. They got mad, swore they would fill the boy so full of lead it would pay to mine him.

Young Jeff was given that word when he passed through Socorro on the bandit's trail. He accepted the word gravely, thanked his informant and rode out into the desert that bordered the river below the town.

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THREE days later Jeff Milton rode back through Socorro, loping along as though all were serene. No one stopped him for questioning.

As a matter of fact, the tale of what happened when the young ranger came up with the three desperadoes has never been told unless it lies buried in the archives of the Ranger force. But the countryside was mighty curious. Many of them came riding into Ysleta to try to learn the details. Finally one of them questioned the lad.

"Oh, those hombres?" laughed Jeff Milton. "Well, they won't be around from now on."

Unofficially, reports seeped in from across the river of a battle in the Mexican hills. The peons who found the bullet-riddled bodies of the three law-breakers awesomely confirmed the young Ranger's statement.

Almost always Jeff Milton was a lone battler. He never asked for help, no matter what the odds. Even in his greatest gun battle, although there were plenty of spectators to tell of the affray, he had no help.

That was when Bob Brown, John Yost, Jess Dunlap and the Owens brothers, George and Louis, cold-blooded killers all of them, with prices on their heads, set out to rob the Southern Pacific train bringing up gold from Guaymas, Mexico, to the main line of the railroad at Benson, Arizona. That was in 1889, when the Southwest, with its rustling wars, gambling killings and the like, was still wild enough for anyone.

Had they known that Jeff Milton was the express messenger, they probably would have put the job off until another day.

Jeff needed all his luck and his uncanny precision with a sixgun that day. It was a diabolical scheme, one that seemed certain of enormous profits without the firing of a single shot. Bob Brown and his men had entered the little town of Fairbank rigged out like cowboys. It was decided to pull the robbery off right at the station, when the door of the express car, and possibly the safe, would be open.

There was always a little group of townswomen at the station when the train came in. Brown planned that he and each of his men would grab a woman, force her to walk in front of him as a shield right up to the door of the express car. Leveling their guns over the women's shoulders, they would force the helpless express agent to throw down his arms.

But they hadn't figured on the peculiar workings of Jeff Milton's mind, his absolute coolness in the face of any situation, no matter how desperate, and his flair for doing the unexpected.

The train pulled into the station, the

express car door slid open. Each holdup man grabbed a woman, forced her ahead, taking shelter behind her.

"Hands up—and stick 'em high!" sang our Dunlap, the first to reach the open door, his gun leveled across the shoulder of his human shield.

Jeff Milton's hands went up—but they halted in mid-air, the right one holding his Colt .45. Instantly he fired. The bullet flashed harmlessly past the woman's cheek, took Dunlap squarely between the eyes as he peered over her shoulder.

Yost, behind his fair protector, was next in line. He was smart enough to keep his head down, but Milton's next bullet shot all four fingers off his gun hand, and sent his .45 flying through the air.

By that time Brown and the Owens boys were at the door. Of course, they couldn't boost the women in ahead of them. So they shoved them to one side, leaped for the door, firing as they came. The women were still in range behind the bandits, so Jeff Milton held his fire.

A bullet caught Jeff in the right shoulder, put that arm out of commission. He transferred his gun to his left hand, tried to reach a point to bring the woman out of his range. But when the three bandits got into the car and saw that their antagonist was Jeff Milton, they wanted no close-up fighting. They leaped from the car, took shelter around the corner of the station.

But they weren't through. They had left rifles in their saddle holsters. One of them kept the engine crew covered, with orders not to move the train, while the other two poured a hail of lead through the sides of the wooden express car. One bullet caught Jeff in the chest and he went down. But he rolled to the safe, slammed the door shut, and twirled the combination.

He took one last shot at his assailants before he lost consciousness. His bullet clipped Brown's ear, left it in shreds. The bandits raced for the car when the firing stopped, but when they saw that the safe had been closed, and realized that the townsmen, aroused by the battle, would soon be out in force, they ran to their horses and galloped out of town.

FOR a long time Jeff Milton lingered between life and death. Then he began to mend. He'd be out in a week or two, his doctor told him. But that night a visitor slipped into Jeff's room, whispered several words in his ear. Slowly, painfully, the wounded man eased himself out of bed, found that he could stay erect on his feet, decided that he was all right.

He climbed into his clothes and strapped on his guns. A friend saddled his horse for him, and Jeff slipped his carbine into the saddle holster. He was all ready to ride away when the doctor showed up for his evening call.

"Jeff, you can't do it!" the medico declared. "Those wounds will open up. You'll die before you've been in the saddle three hours!"

Jeff said grimly, "Sorry, Doc. Can't stop. I've got a job to finish."

It was a long way to where his friend had told him Brown and the Owens brothers were hiding out. Days passed. The town began to worry. They were just about to form a posse to search for him when a Mexican rode into town on a mule, sought out the mayor and handed him a message which read:

Send two coffins and a doctor.

JEFF MILTON

That would be coffins for two of the desperadoes and a doctor for Jeff, they figured. It wasn't quite that way, however. There were two dead bandits all right, Brown and Louie Owens. The doctor was for George Owens, who was too badly shot up to move.

"Me? I never felt better in my life," Jeff Milton said.

Years later the Immigration Service named a naval vessel for him.

"Jefferson Davis Milton is one of the most modest men and one of the most fearless officers ever to serve the American people," stated United States Commissioner of Immigration Daniel F. McCormick when the vessel was christened.

It was mighty nice of the Immigration Service to name a harbor cruiser after Jeff Milton, said his friends. But to do the man full justice it should have been a battleship.

Diablo stood unmoving, glowering, until Señor Roberto was even with him. Then he reached out and bit him on the leg.



ONE LITTLE DRINK FOR DIABLO

By BILL GULICK

MONEY, Juan Ibanez mused ruefully as he toyed with his empty *tequilla* glass, was the mother of all evil. It was filthy stuff, was money.

It was an invention of the devil to make a man work when he would much rather lie in the sun and dream of horse-racing and *tequilla*-drinking and love-making.

Juan sighed, and wished he had a hundred dollars.

Wistfully, he recalled those happy days that he and his horse Diablo used to share—those long-ago days when he had not these worries about women and money and work. Those days, of course, were before his life had become complicated by Rosita. He frowned at his empty glass. Sometimes he almost wished he was a horse—like Diablo. Diablo's life, at least, was not complicated by this money stuff.

A horse nickered impatiently at the hitchrail outside the How Many Saloon. Juan sighed again, and flipped his last quarter on the bar. "A small one for Diablo," he said. "I think maybe he is thirsty."

The sour-faced bartender poured two fingers of *tequilla* into a wash basin, add-

ears absently, Juan started thinking. He wondered who in Tres Rios had a hundred dollars they would loan him.

Sheriff Hoss Perkins had money, he knew. But the sheriff did not like him. Nothing would suit the sheriff better than to throw him in his rotten calaboose—again.

It was difficult to think standing up, so Juan sat down in the shade of the saloon. He frowned. Señor Roberto de Alvarez had money; in fact, he was rich. Often, Rosita told Juan that he should be more like Señor Roberto. He was a gentleman, she said. He wore a clean shirt every day. He took a bath every day. *Por Dios!* Juan thought, how could a man get so dirty?

He sighed. Señor Roberto did not like him either.

The sunlight glancing off the alkali

A real estate peddler, a sleek, wealthy hombre, a sheriff and a beautiful woman all ganged up on easy-going Juan Ibanez to make him a lowly plowman. Then a jug of tequilla and a cold-deck mortgage paper put Juan back on his hind legs and tore Tres Rios town apart!

ing a pint of plain water as chaser. Careful not to spill the precious liquid, Juan carried the basin out to Diablo and held it while the horse drank. It cheered him to see how much Diablo enjoyed the pick-you-up. There were times when he wished he hadn't taught him this trick—Diablo's capacity for alcohol was enormous—yet who could begrudge such an intelligent animal a little one every now and then? Even a horse, Juan knew, sometimes had troubles he must drown.

When Diablo had swallowed the last drop, he lifted his angular, bony head in hopeful expectation. One drink barely dampened his tongue. Mournfully, Juan turned his pockets inside out.

"We are broke, my little pet," he said sorrowfully. "Also, we need one hundred dollars. Do you know where we can get one hundred dollars?"

Diablo nickered, and cocked an eye at the empty basin. Scratching the horse's

street hurt his eyes, so he pulled his sombrero down to shade them. He felt tired. This thinking business was hard work. A fly kept buzzing around his face. Feebly, he brushed it away. If only he had one hundred dollars, he mused, he could buy this farm for Rosita and then she would marry him. Only one hundred. . . .

The fly settled on Juan's nose. He tried to lift his hand, found it too much of an effort. Presently, he began snoring. . . .

He had a pleasant dream. In this dream, he was lying in a hammock with a drink in one hand and his sombrero in the other. People kept parading by, each one dropping a five dollar bill into the sombrero. It filled up, overflowed; greenbacks covered the hammock and the ground around it. Juan was just reaching out to pick them up, when the hammock overturned violently.

"You lazy no-good! Get up! You lie-in-the-sun-and-snore!"

Reluctantly, Juan opened one eye. Rosita was standing over him, beautiful red mouth a thin line of anger, dark liquid eyes snapping. Juan sighed.

"Hello, my little dove," he murmured, and closed his eyes again. Rosita kicked him on a shin.

"Get up, I say! I have brought the man to see you."

"Man?" Yawning, Juan lumbered to his feet. "What man?"

"The real estate man. The one who is going to show you the farm."

"Oh," Juan said, "that one." Mildly curious, he inspected the man who stood beside Rosita. He was very short and chunky. His face was round as a canteloupe. He had hardly any nose at all.

"This is Señor Prigg," Rosita said. Juan shook hands.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, Señor Pig."

"Prigg's the name," the real estate agent said briskly. "Elmer Theodore Prigg."

"*Por Dios!*" Juan murmured. "What a big name for such a little man."

Rosita frowned and said, "Señor Prigg wants you to ride out with him to look at the farm. I will wait for you in town."

Juan knew better than to argue with Rosita, so he shrugged and nodded. "Whatever you say, my little chicken."



THE farm lay on the edge of the badlands half a dozen miles west of Tres Rios. The bleak dry alkali flats didn't look very fertile to Juan, but Señor Prigg was enthusiastic about the possibilities of the land.

"It will grow anything," he said. "Absolutely anything."

Juan looked sceptically at the two-room adobe hacienda and the barren acres surrounding it. Turning in his saddle, he gazed north toward the prosperous estate of Señor Roberto de Alvarez. He felt a bit envious as he saw the white roof of the spacious home, the luxurious green of the pasture-lands where blooded palominos grazed. If he could have something like that, he mused, he would not mind being a farmer.

"You will have a very fine neighbor,"

Señor Prigg said. "A very fine gentleman."

Juan rolled a cigarette and yawned. He wondered if he would have to take a bath every day when he got to be a rich land owner. "It is all very nice," he said. "But I do not know if I want a farm."

"The señorita said you did."

"Si? Then I guess I do."

Señor Prigg rubbed his hands together briskly. "Good. We'll go into town and fill out the papers right away."

Half a mile down the Tres Rios trail they met Sheriff Hoss Perkins and Señor Roberto de Alvarez riding in the opposite direction. Señor Roberto's mustache was sleeker and blacker than ever today, Juan noticed. It looked as though it had just had a waxing. His white shirt was spotless; fresh this morning, no doubt. Juan wondered if he had already taken his bath today.

"So," Señor Roberto said, "you are going to be my neighbor."

Juan shrugged. "Maybe."

Hoss Perkins jerked at one end of his handlebar mustache and guffawed. "I kin just see you turnin' into a dirt farmer. What are you goin' to raise—tumbleweeds?"

"No," Juan scowled and laid a hand on the sixgun on his hip. He did not like people who laughed at him. "No, I think maybe I will breed fine horses."

Señor Roberto gave an indulgent smile. His beady eyes flicked proudly down to the smooth lines of the palomino mare he was riding. He gestured at Diablo.

"Is that rack of bones going to sire these fine horses?"

Diablo nickered in anger. His long ears flattened out against his head. Juan knew his feelings were hurt.

Hoss Perkins and Señor Roberto swung their mounts around to ride on by. Diablo stood unmoving, glowering, until Señor Roberto was even with him. Then he reached out and bit him on the leg.

Señor Roberto screamed, and involuntarily sank his spurs deep into the mare's flanks. She nickered, reared high, and dumped him into the middle of the dusty trail, clean shirt, waxed mustache and all.

Watching him get up and dust himself off, Juan laughed. "Maybe you will have

to go home and take another bath, si?" He reined Diablo about. "Come, Señor Pig, let us be going."

"The name is Prigg," the real estate agent snapped. "Elmer Theodore Prigg."

Diablo walked a few steps down the trail, then stopped, turned and stared back. Nothing Juan could do would move him.

"He's a stubborn brute," Prigg said.

Juan frowned in puzzlement. Diablo wasn't the sort who would carry a grudge, not even against a person like Señor Roberto. Yet there was a strange gleam in Diablo's eyes. He kept staring at the palomino mare Señor Roberto was riding. Suddenly Juan began chuckling.

"I think maybe," he murmured, "that Diablo likes that little mare. Is it not so, Diablo?"

Diablo shook his head and snorted in disgust. He didn't like to be caught getting sentimental. To show Juan how mistaken he was, he galloped all the way back to Tres Rios.



ROSITA was waiting in the real estate office. "Well," she asked Juan, "what do you think of the farm?"

Juan shrugged. "How can I buy a farm without any money?"

"I have arranged that. Señor Roberto's bank will loan you the money."

Juan scowled. He was suspicious of anything in which Señor Roberto was connected. He knew that the wealthy land owner wasn't in the habit of making deals unless he stood to profit by them.

"Loan? What do I have to do?"

Rosita smiled happily. "Nothing. Except sign a little paper."

"What kind of paper?"

"A mortgage paper. On Diablo. You sign it and they give you the money. Then in three months you pay the money back and they give you the paper back. It is very simple."

Juan admitted it sounded simple enough. Only he did not like signing anything with Diablo's name in it. He scratched his head.

"This mortgage, what will it do to Diablo?"

Rosita's eyes snapped. "Sometimes I think you love that horse more than me. This paper will not hurt Diablo at all. Señor Roberto said so."

"A mortgage," Señor Prigg broke in helpfully, "is a kind of chattel loan. The mortgagor receives a paper covering the mortgagee's property which secures said mortgagor's money until it is repaid. Understand?"

Juan studied Señor Prigg's stub nose. "This mortgage," he said slowly, "you say it will cover Diablo?"

"Right."

"Like a saddle?"

Señor Prigg frowned. "Well, yes. . . " he said. "Only not exactly in the same place."

Juan nodded. He was satisfied. Turning, he took Rosita's hand. "Come, my little chicken, we will go sign this paper. Maybe I have been wrong about Señor Roberto, after all."

It was very simple, Juan discovered. He and Rosita just went into the bank and a man stuck a paper in front of him and showed him where to write his name. Pen in hand, Juan hesitated.

"I do not see why," he murmured, "that they use such small print for such big words."

The banker cleared his throat and explained it to him. The words he used sounded even bigger than those on the paper. Rosita nudged Juan.

"Sign it and get the money before he changes his mind," she whispered. Juan shrugged and scrawled out his name. The banker asked him how he wanted the money—check or cash.

"Cash," Juan said. "In silver dollars."

With the silver pieces jingling pleasantly in a cloth bag in his pocket, Juan and Rosita left the bank and walked downstreet toward the real estate office. Passing the How Many Saloon, Juan could not keep his steps from lagging. At last he halted and took a dollar out of the bag.

"Rosita," he said, "could I—"

"No!" she snapped. "This money is to buy a farm, not to get drunk with."

"Not even one little one?"

"No."

Juan sighed, and they started walking down the street again. Rosita seemed

very happy. Her hand clasped Juan's tightly and she hummed an old Spanish song about a caballero who played a guitar and rode a white horse and killed himself because a señorita forgot to smile at him.

"It will be wonderful!" she breathed. "You and me and a farm all our own."

"And Diablo," Juan added.

Rosita pursed her lips. She did not like Diablo, Juan knew. She thought he was a bad influence for Juan. But after a moment, her face brightened. "And Diablo," she said. "He can help you work."

Juan halted, and let go of her hand. "Work? At what?"

Rosita's eyes snapped—a bad sign, Juan knew. "Sometimes," she said, "I cannot understand why I want to marry such a lazy no-good. You must go to work to pay back the money. You can work for Señor Roberto. He said he would pay you and Diablo a dollar a day apiece."

"To do what?"

"To plough, of course. What else could you do?"

Juan turned very white. He looked at Rosita without speaking for a moment, then turned back toward the bank. She seized his arm.

"Where are you going?"

Gently he shook the hand off. "To give the man back his money. Juan and Diablo do not plough for anybody."

"If you take that money back, I will never marry you. I will never speak to you again."

Juan gazed at her with pain-filled eyes. He was hurt, hurt deeply. He wished he could make Rosita understand the way it was. It was not that he was afraid of work. It was just that work did not appeal to him as much as did horseracing and love-making and *tequilla*-drinking. If the gods had made a man thus, what could a man do?

He shrugged, and turned away. "So be it, then," he said, and moved off down the board walk.

Rosita did not speak. Juan walked very slowly, hoping, hoping. . . . But she did not call him back. He rolled a cigarette, lit it, inhaled deeply.

At last, he could stand it no longer. Turning quickly, he threw the cigarette away. "Rosita!" he called. The word

died, lumped up, deep in his throat. She was out of earshot, running swiftly down the street, away from him. He stared down at his boots.

"Sometimes," he muttered, "I think maybe I do not understand women."

Across the street, over at the hitch-rail of the How Many Saloon, Diablo nickered. Juan gazed at him. Diablo looked sad, unhappy. Juan wondered if he were worried about this love stuff too.

The money bag in his pocket weighed heavily against his hip, and he sighed and started slowly toward the bank. The day was very hot. Diablo nickered again. Juan's tongue was very dry. Suddenly, he turned aside, cut across the street toward the saloon.

Who would ever miss one little silver dollar?



JUAN was having another dream. This dream was very strange. He seemed to be lying in a blacksmith shop where some smithies were making horseshoes. They were using his head for an anvil.

One of these smithies had a snub nose like a pig; another had a black, sleek mustache; the third had a long handlebar mustache, and kept shouting and laughing as he pounded. Juan groaned. He wished they would hurry and finish those horseshoes.

Suddenly, he woke up. He was lying on a hard bunk in a very small cell. Outside the cell, Sheriff Hoss Perkins was pounding on the bars and yelling at him.

"Roll out, you lazy no-good! Here's yore dinner."

Gripping the bars of the cell door to keep from falling, Juan stood up and stared at the greasy-looking plate of food in the sheriff's hand. His stomach turned wrong-side out.

"Take it away," he whispered. "I'm not hungry."

Hoss Perkins chuckled. "No wonder, after last night."

"Last night? Then this is tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, if that makes sense."

"And why am I in the calaboose?"

"Why are you usually here? Drunken-

ness in a public place, disturbin' the peace, destroyin' property, malicious mischief. . . ."

Juan interrupted with a feeble wave of his hand. "Enough. How much is my fine?"

Hoss Perkins frowned and scratched his head. "Well, I got no business lettin' you off so easy. But I'll settle for forty-two bucks. Cash."

Juan nodded, and reached for the money bag on his hip. It was gone. He gazed blankly at the sheriff. "I have been robbed!"

Hoss Perkins took the bag out of one of his own pockets and said, "Lookin' for this?"

"Si." Seizing the bag, Juan emptied it on the concrete floor. He couldn't remember a whole lot about last night. He remembered vaguely that he had had a drink or two; that Diablo had joined him after a bit. There had been some sort of rumpus in the saloon, he remembered, when Diablo had come clumping in. After that, things sort of blurred.

Laboriously, he counted the coins on the floor. "Thirty-nine, forty, forty-one, forty-two. . . ." He stopped counting and looked up. "How much did you say the fine was?"

"Forty-two bucks."

"That's funny. That's just how much I have here."

Sheriff Perkins scowled and pulled at his mustache. Squinting down at the silver dollars, he muttered, "Shore is a coincident, ain't it?"

With the money bag very light and his heart very heavy, Juan shamled out of the cell when the sheriff unlocked it. In the front office, the sheriff gave him back his gun. Buckling it on, Juan stood for a time staring bleakly out the dusty window.

"My horse," he said to the sheriff, "where is he?"

Hoss Perkins shifted awkwardly about and did not answer. Juan stared sharply at him. "My horse!"

"Now, Juan," Hoss Perkins soothed. "Don't get too worked up about this. I seen the paper and it was all legal."

Juan seized his gun. *Por Dios*, if anything had happened to Diablo, someone would pay! "Tell me!" he hissed.

Hoss Perkins stared at Juan's gun hand and nervously jerked at his mustache. "Señor Roberto took him away this morning. Said Diablo was his property now."

"But that could not be!"

"Señor Roberto showed me a paper you'd signed."

"But that was just a mortgage paper. They said I had three months to pay the money back."

Hoss Perkins shrugged. "Reckon you didn't read that mortgage very close. There was a clause in it that said if you didn't take the one hundred dollars and pay it down on the land within eight hours, the mortgage was due and payable immediately. That chunk of land belongs to Señor Roberto."

Juan, for a moment, was incapable of thought or action. Then piece by piece, he saw through this very clever scheme.

"I will kill him! Little by little, I will kill him!"

"It's legal, I tell you. Diablo belongs to Señor Roberto now, an' the only way you can get him back is to buy him back."

"What does Señor Roberto intend doing with Diablo?"

Hoss Perkins shrugged. "I heard him say something about teachin' him to plough."

"*Por Dios!*" Juan breathed.



WHEELING, he stumbled through the door. A bay horse stood in the shade outside the jail—the sheriff's horse, Juan knew. He didn't hesitate. In two swift strides he had reached the horse, swung into the saddle.

"Come back with that hoss!" cried Hoss Perkins.

"*Manana!*" Juan threw back over his shoulder, and touched the bay with his spurs.

At the outskirts of Tres Rios, Juan took the trail toward Señor Roberto's rancho. He was not sure of what he was going to do. Señor Roberto, of course, deserved to die for what he had done; yet if Juan killed him then Sheriff Perkins would hang him. Juan did not think he would like that.

Riding into the yard of the spacious estate, Juan found no one about. Toward

the rear of the house, out by one of the corrals, he could see several vaqueros working. They were making lots of noise—shouting and galloping around. They were probably breaking a colt.

He dismounted at the front door and went into the house without knocking. He had never been in Señor Roberto's home before, and the bigness of it awed him. Pausing in the dimness of the living room, he stood uncertainly until his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. Then he saw an office at the end of a hallway and walked toward it.

Señor Roberto was sitting behind a shiny desk when Juan entered the room. He looked up, startled.

"I did not hear you knock," he said.

Juan smiled very pleasantly. "We are such old friends I did not think it necessary to knock." Pulling a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket, he slouched on the desk edge and built himself a cigarette. The silence was heavy, and it got heavier as the seconds ticked off. Señor Roberto's nervous eyes flicked to Juan's gun.

"What do you want?" he asked finally.

Juan shrugged. He would let Señor Roberto fidget for a bit. "I just dropped by to see my old *amigo* Señor Roberto de Alvarez. Rosita says you are a gentleman and that I should be more like you. I thought I would drop in and see how a gentleman acts when he is working."

Smiling, Juan scratched a match and held it to the quirly. He looked around the room, admiring the furnishings.

Señor Roberto broke the silence. "Juan, about this mortgage paper. . . ."

"Sí?" Juan said.

"I don't want you to think that. . . ." He paused and cleared his throat.

A dusty, sweaty vaquero burst into the room suddenly, rushed up to Señor Roberto. He was a slim swarthy man, and he looked very excited. Juan guessed that he was one of the men he had seen working out in the corral.

"Señor, Señor," the slim vaquero cried without waiting for Señor Roberto to address him, "he is a devil! First it was Ramon, then Sanchez, then Pedro—now it is Amelio!"

Señor Roberto gripped the desk edge and sagged. "No! Not Amelio!"

"Si! Amelio!"

"But he was our best *vaquero*!"

The slim man shrugged. "He will not ride for a long time. His right leg, she go snap—like that."

Juan frowned. He could not understand this. Señor Roberto got up and started pacing the floor. At last, he turned to Juan.

"You have got to take him back."

"Back?" Juan said. "What? Who?"

"Diablo. My fine palominos—he is crippling them up. He fights them all. And my vaqueros—three of them has he ruined."

"Four," the slim man corrected. Señor Roberto shrugged.

"Four, then." He reached into the desk and pulled out a paper. It was the mortgage paper Juan had signed. Roberto tore it into little pieces.

"See, I tear it up! Take your Diablo away."

"But the one hundred dollars I owe you?" Juan protested.

"Forget the money. We will call ourselves even."

Juan sat on the desk edge, thinking, turning these puzzling things over in his mind. He had come here prepared to kill Señor Roberto if necessary. But now—well, it was very confusing.

"I do not know," he said carefully, "if I should do this. I am an honest man. I like to pay my debts."

Another vaquero came rushing into the room. "Señor, that devil horse, he has busted out from the corral! He and the little mare. I think maybe they will stampee all the other horses if we do not stop them!"

Señor Roberto licked his dry lips. Circling the desk, he laid a pleading hand on Juan's arm. "We are old friends, *amigo*. You yourself said that. Forget the money. Take Diablo away."

Juan gazed critically down at his cigarette, tossed it over in a corner. "This little mare," he said. "Diablo likes her, no?"

Señor Roberto threw up his hands. "Never in my life have I seen such a crazy horse. He is *loco*."

"Hmmmm," Juan said.

Señor Roberto clutched his arm again. "Look. You want a farm, yes? I will

make you a deal. I will give you this farm which you were going to buy if you will take Diabo away."

Juan frowned. "I do not know if I want a farm."

"But Rosita said—"

"Si. But Rosita, she does not love me anymore. And why should I have a farm if she will not marry me?"

"I will patch up this little quarrel for you. By all the saints, I swear it," Señor Roberto wiped the sweat off his forehead and murmured, "*Por Dios!* all my fine horses, all my brave vaqueros!" His eyes pleaded with Juan. "Is it a deal?"

Juan was tempted. He knew Rosita respected Señor Roberto. It would be very nice, he mused, to have Señor Roberto plead with her for him. It would be nice to have a farm and Diablo and Rosita. The three of them could be very happy.

LEANING back against the adobe wall of the hacienda with his arm about Rosita, Juan gazed contentedly at the setting sun. He was happy. Nearby, Diablo grazed on the sparse dry grass, and from time to time raised his head to cast a shy but loving glance at the palomino mare. He was happy, too.

Rosita sighed. "It is all very wonderful," she murmured.

"Si," Juan said.

His arm tightened about her. He thought maybe he would kiss her pretty soon, when it got darker. There was no hurry. Tomorrow, they would be married. Then every evening they would sit here like this, watching the sun go down. It would be pleasant.

Rosita looked up at the western sky. "I hope it rains tonight," Rosita said very softly.

Juan chuckled. Women were very fool-

High drama and dashing adventure rode the trail with romance in the wild and woolly West. For the outstanding stories of the brave, glamorous girls who lived and loved in the he-man's world of the old frontier, read **RANGELAND ROMANCES**.

He sighed and shook his head. "I am sorry. It cannot be. I think it is better that you keep Diablo."

Señor Roberto stared blankly. "*Madre de Dios!* Why must I keep him?"

Juan stood up. He was smiling. He had lost Rosita, he had lost the farm, he had lost Diablo. But he did not care. He was happy.

"Because, Señor Roberto," he said softly, "Diablo is in love with this little mare. I could not take him away from her." Turning, Juan walked toward the door, paused for a moment on the threshold. "Adios, amigo."

Señor Roberto looked like he was going to choke. He waved a feeble hand. "One moment. I will give you the mare, too. To save my other horses, I will do it. I will give you Diablo and the farm and the mare. And I will talk with Rosita. Only take him away." He swallowed hard. "For me, *amigo mio*."

Juan stood in the doorway for a time, hesitating. At last, he nodded. "Bueno. for you, amigo, I will do it."

ish sometimes, he thought. "And why, my sweet little chicken, do you want it to rain?"

Rosita smiled a sweet, small smile. "So that you can plough tomorrow. You must make the land ready and plant the good crops."

"But I have no plough."

"Señor Roberto will loan you one," Rosita said.

Juan sat very still. The sun was gone now. A deep orange glow hung above the western horizon. He sighed, and murmured, "Sometimes I wonder. . . ."

"What?" Rosita said.

Juan's heart was too heavy to answer just now. Anxiously, he searched the sky for clouds. He smiled. There were none.

"Nothing, my sweet," he murmured. "Nothing." Then, pushing the unpleasant thought of ploughing into the back of his mind, he kissed Rosita gently.

He did not think it would rain tonight.

El Lobo Takes a Town

CHAPTER ONE

Lester Skull Comes to Town

WHEN the fireflies began to flicker among the burroaks, we rode up out of the river bottom. Nineteen of us, as murderous a band of killer wolves

as ever ham-strung a cow. El Lobo rode in the lead because he was the biggest, the strongest, the most deadly with a gun. He rode a big gray stud with a Roman nose. The stud was as dangerous as the long-jawed man straddling him. El Lobo rode deep in his saddle and his stirrup leathers were long.

He halted us at the edge of town. He



A novelette of swift, dramatic action on the bandit trails
By FRED GIPSON

For years, El Lobo, the great gray human wolf, roamed the Border's dim trails seeking the man who had killed his brother, and never knowing that double-rigged death rode with him—waiting only for the weird wolf call that would signal wholesale massacre!

leaned back in his saddle and threw up his head. And into the night lifted the howl of the great gray prairie wolf. The

hunting call of the loafer, rolling wide under a quarter moon. A lonely, weird sound, a sound to hush all other sounds.



El Lobo and the boys found the old man reading a book.

A sound to send little prickles of cold fear running down a man's hide, even into his boots.

The tinny tinkle of a piano going in Soft Sally's Saloon down the street apiece broke off sharply. Two tomcats fighting over a she in the alley behind Hurry Hopkins' restaurant hushed their murderous squallings.

Back under the liveoaks to the left sat a little two-room log cabin. Lamplight shone through its single window. It fell across the head and shoulders of a long-whiskered old jasper who had been rocking and whittling on the front stoop. The old gent wasn't rocking or whittling any longer.

The little cowtown waited in tense silence while we rode down its main street. It waited as if it had been expecting us. Maybe it had. Our spotters had been there for better than a month now. Cold-eyed, silent strangers like them were bound to stir talk and speculation in a peaceful little town like Fredonia.

We filed in, a ghostly, silent pack, drifting slowly past the false-fronted store buildings. We moved in like a band of wolves, fixing to make a kill. Nobody spoke a word. Even the sound of our horses' hoofs sounded strangely muffled in the powdery dust of the street. El Lobo knew the value of suspense, of silence and timing when it came to throwing the fear of God and of El Lobo into a town.

Over my shoulder I kept watching the whiskery old jasper back yonder on his front stoop. He sat with a whittling knife in one hand and a foot-long board of soft pine in the other. He sat and stared and the thin, curled shavings lay in a ring around his rocking chair. His long-whiskered chin was lifted. Lamplight gleamed on his bald head. There was something in the way his head was cocked sideways that put me in mind of an old buffalo bull scenting blood.

That was old Trapper Traywick, but I didn't know it yet.

"Little," I heard El Lobo order in a quiet voice filled with authority, "take care of that yonder. You and the Breed!"

I turned in my saddle. The Breed's senseless smile confronted me, his pearl-white teeth shining even in the darkness. "Thees way, señor," he said.

Across the street was a general store. A dull glow shone from the two windows on either side of the door. Under a single lamp, which hung from the rafters, stood an old gent, humped over a money bag. He wore steel-rimmed spectacles that hung low over a pinched nose. His hands moved slowly, fingering greenbacks with loving care.

The Breed crossed over and swung down. Inside, we heard the rough voice of a man saying, "Close to three thousand in that pile, Jinson. I made a killing with that bunch of steers."

"How long do I keep it, Bob?" the old gent asked.

I pulled my gun and stepped through the door. The Breed was tromping my heels.

"Not long, old man," I said. "In fact, you can hand it over now!"

The old duck with the spectacles hesitated. The color drained out of his face. It was easy to see that taking money from him, even when it wasn't his, was going to hurt him bad. The second gent was a full-faced, short-coupled rancher with steady gray eyes.



THE breed stepped forward into the light and shoved that maddening grin of his into their faces. He cocked his six-shooter with a loud click. But it was that combination of Mexican and Indian features of his bold, beetle-browed face that shocked them into dumb submission. That and that infernal grin of his. The rancher's jaw sagged and the little old gent named Jinson handed the money bag over without a word.

We backed to the door. "Thank you, gents," I said. "My name's Charlie Little. We'll be seeing a heap of each other in the next few days."

Then I turned my back and walked out to show them how much cold nerve I had.

But I didn't have as much nerve as I made out to have. I could feel cold worms crawling up my backbone as the Breed and I headed across the street toward Soft Sally's Saloon.

The rest of the pack was ganging up there. The great El Lobo, with his long jaws and clabber-milk eyes stood a little apart from the rest.

"You do any good, Little?" he asked.

I handed him the bulging sack. "It'll do for tobacco money," I said.

"Did they get the sheriff?" he wanted to know.

"That bird ducked out on us," Gus Gildea spoke up. "He was gone. The boys claimed he was a little old rooster without no sand in his craw."

"All right, keep an eye peeled for him," El Lobo ordered. "Little, you and the Breed foller me! The rest stay outside, in case some damn fool tries to kick the lid off. You hear that, Gus?"

We pushed through the batwings and stopped just inside, El Lobo, the Breed, and I. El Lobo rubbed the polished leather of his gun scabbard with his palm while his eyes roved the room.

Soft Sally looked up from where she sat on a high stool behind the bar. She didn't exactly smile, but her mouth opened and closed. One after another, the men at the bar turned around and stared. The faro dealer looked up from his table. He straightened a stickpin in his necktie. That stickpin had a diamond in it the size of a Mexican bean. Then he sat and stared at the black, shiny, high-topped boots, El Lobo wore, at the silver-mounted spurs, the jaguar-skin vest with its Indian beadwork. He sat and stared and said nothing. The piano player was not in sight.

Soft Sally said in a low voice, "Come in, gents!"

She was as pretty as ever, it seemed like, only a lot older, of course. Fair-skinned, blue-eyed, with that same hopeful twist to her mouth. There were some lines beginning to show in her neck, though. Age mostly begins to show first in a woman's neck.

El Lobo said nothing. He didn't move. Neither did the Breed. I sucked in a deep breath and waited.

Soft Sally got down off her stool and walked to the middle of the bar and laid her elbows on it.

"Line up, strangers," she invited. "I've never yet turned a man down when he wanted a drink. Wallowing in money or dead broke, a man can always get one drink at Soft Sally's bar. That's where I got the name of Soft Sally!"

She tried to smile. It wasn't much of a smile, but the effort she put into it cut

down through my belly like a dull-bladed knife. I thought: *She looks like that picture of Mother Mary that used to hang on the wall. Why in the hell did she have to be like she is?*



SHE waited now, evidently not knowing what else to say. El Lobo stripped the clothes off her in one long look, then spoke, barely moving his thin lips.

"You gents packing guns can drag 'em now or lay 'em on the bar," he invited. "It don't make a damn to us which you choose!"

He reached for the makings and sifted tobacco into a brown paper. The group studied us with growing alarm. I kept my hand on my gun and looked them over as if they were bugs. The Breed's grin and heavily-lidded eyes were awful things to face.

El Lobo said, "I'm called El Lobo behind my back. But to my face I'm Lester Skull. Some of you might remember me in these parts, but it ain't likely. I've come to take over this town. Understand? This town's mine as long as I want to use it. I've got plenty of men outside to back up my talk."

Soft Sally was studying him with a queer light in her eyes, a mixture of fear and contempt, it seemed to me.

"And nobody gets a chance!" she said. "That's raw, coming from a big man like you. It makes you look little to me!"

"That's all right how I look to you, sister," El Lobo said. "The idea is, I'm the law now. Just remember that!"

It took my breath when she said, "Would you like to shoot it out, Lester Skull? Just you and me, across the bar, here?"

"No," he said. "I wouldn't like to shoot it out with you. Not now."

"Scared?" she taunted.

"Sister," El Lobo said, "they don't breed 'em I'm scared of!" His milky eyes had narrowed now and his thin lips were pressed tightly together. He lashed out suddenly at the paralyzed group of men lining the rail. "*Lay them guns on the bar!*"

A door opened at the back of the saloon

and a man stepped through. He was a little man. He wore a star on his vest and there was a gun in his hand.

"Wait a minute, men!" he called.

It was easy to see he was trying to keep his voice steady, but he couldn't make it. The voice cracked in the middle and the fright in his brown eyes made me want to look away. But he came on down the bar and leaned an elbow on it to steady himself.

Somebody gasped, "Tiny Traywick!"

"You men consider yourselves under arrest," the little lawman said to us.

He swung up his gun. Lead from El Lobo's gold-buffed Colt cut him down before the frightened little man ever managed to level his cutter.

He sagged against the bar and his gun fell out of his hand.

"I guess he got me," he said, and you could tell he had expected it all the time.

He fell down on the floor. El Lobo finished licking the cigarette he'd built.

CHAPTER TWO

Honkatonk Story

THE rest of the men were carefully laying their guns on the bar when the main door opened. The hairy-faced old jasper I'd seen rocking and whittling on his gallery back there under the live oaks pushed through. He stood, blinking watery eyes in the lamp light, then walked to where the little sheriff lay dead on the floor. He crouched and laid a bony hand on the dead man's chest. The room grew silent.

After a time, the old scarecrow of a man turned his head and stared long and hard at El Lobo. Then he shoved crab-like hands under his son's body and swung him up across his shoulder. It seemed impossible that a stringy, ragged-muscled old gobbler like him could lift the dead man, even though the lawman had been small. But old Trapper Traywick accomplished it easily. He padded out of the saloon on moccasined feet, with the dead man across his shoulder. And dangling hands slapped limply against his scrawny rump at every step.

El Lobo was saying, "That's a sample. This town's mine. And anybody who

wants to buck me can start now with a .45. That's all the talk I'll listen to."

But the only man with the guts to buck El Lobo was being carried out dead on the shoulder of his hairy-faced old father.

A little later, I glanced out the window and saw Trapper Traywick back on his front gallery with the lamp light shining on his bald head. He was rocking and whittling again. . . .

Fredonia had the look of a ghost town at sunup the next morning. Nobody stirred. There was not even a hound dog in sight. I rode down the street with the Breed and I said, "Looks like they all died last night."

"*Si, señor!*" said the Breed. And he grinned that damnable grin.

We pulled up at Soft Sally's Saloon. She was sitting on that same high stool back of the bar. She sat with her head in her hands, staring at the floor.

"Is it that bad?" I asked.

She didn't answer. She didn't even look up. The Breed walked around the end of the bar and took a drink. He slid the bottle down the mahogany toward me and reached for another. He took another drink.

I took a long pull and then walked along the bar until I was in front of Soft Sally. I set the bottle down where she had to see the ring on my finger. It was a hammered silver ring with Mexican jade setting. The jade was cut to represent some fool Indian god or other.

Soft Sally looked up and said, "He oughtn't to have killed our sheriff. Tiny Traywick was a good little man. His father, old Trapper Traywick, is a good man. It'll go hard with old Trapper."

Then she saw the ring. Her eyes widened. She looked up at me and then down at the ring again.

"Where did you get that?" she gasped.

"You know it?" I countered.

She stared hard at me. "Yes," she said, "I know it."

I motioned toward the Breed. "That's the Breed," I said. "He's half Mex and the other half Indian, but he's a friend of mine."

The Breed bowed gracefully and grinned at her. "*Si, señora!*" he said.

"But he's an owlhooter and a cut-throat," I added. "He's a horse thief.

He'd stab his grandmother in the back for a double eagle. He's a rotten mixture. That's the brand of company I keep!"

The Breed took off his hat and bowed lower than ever this time. "Sí, señora!" he said.

"Now, Breed," I said, "you can take that ugly face of yours out of here. And don't let me catch you with one of them buffalo-wallow ears flattened against the walls of this saloon."

"No, señor," said the Breed.

He bowed a third time, grinned, and went out, shutting the door behind him.

Near panic was plain in Soft Sally's eyes. Her breath was coming hard.

"Now talk straight," I commanded harshly. "But not loud enough for that damned Breed to hear. Where did you see this ring before?"

"In—in Fort McKavitt," she said.

I stared hard at her, to make sure she wasn't lying. I stared for a long time.

"It's the truth," Soft Sally said. "A boy used to wear it in Fort McKavitt. A boy that lived with Nancy Dyatt. His name was Charlie Lasater."

"How come him living with Nancy Dyatt?" I crowded.

"Why—why, his mother left him with her," Soft Sally said. "After she got into trouble about the killing of Jim Lasater."

"Who killed Jim Lasater?"

"Jess Skull!"

"What for?"

"For—well, Jess Skull said some dirty things about me, and—"

"Were they true?"

♦ ♦ ♦
"NO, THEY weren't true!" she cried. "Jim knew they weren't true. He went to kill Jess Skull for saying them. But Jim wasn't a gunman. Jess Skull was. They met there in front of the soldiers' barracks that day. Jim afoot, Jess on his horse. Jim told him he meant to kill him. And Jess Skull sat there on his horse and laughed at Jim and waited till Jim had his gun half out. Then he shot Jim between the eyes."

"And then," I stabbed at her, "you left your baby boy with a woman like Nancy Dyatt and ran off with Jess Skull!"

It was easy to see that I was tearing her apart. But that's what I meant to do.

"I didn't! I didn't!" She was frantic now, almost screaming. "Jess made me go with him. I couldn't help it. He threatened to kill my boy if I didn't. Later I shot him and ran away. But I didn't kill him."

"But you didn't go back for the boy!"

She broke down then and buried her face in her hands on the bar. "I was afraid to," she sobbed. "I was afraid Jess'd get the boy! I thought Nancy Dyatt was all right!"

I studied her for a long time. I felt like she was telling the truth. But a man doesn't turn loose a lifetime of bitter thinking in a minute like that.

"That's your story," I said. "Maybe it's true. Maybe it isn't. Who was the boy's father?"

She raised her head. Her blue eyes were red now. She looked old and beaten. But there was something proud and defiant in the way she answered me.

"His father was Jim Lasater," she said. "I ought to know."

She stared at me a long time with a pitiful twist wrenching her lips.

"And you?" she asked finally. "Are you—"

"I'm Charlie Lasater," I said, and headed for the door.

Behind me, I heard her whimper, "Charlie! Charlie!" The despair in her voice made me stop and turn to face her.

She was coming around the end of the bar, her face torn with emotion. She halted, dubiously, when she saw that I had turned.

"Look," I said coldly. "I've put a stopper in Jess Skull's talk. It was a lead stopper. He won't talk no more. That's how come me following the owlhoot!"

"I'm riding with El Lobo's pack now. They know me as Charlie Little. That's all I want them to know. I'm the one that brought them here when things began to get too hot around Lordsburg. We've had our spotters here for a month. They wrote back how things were. They wrote about Soft Sally. I was willing to bet it was you. I had to come and see. But now that I've come, I don't know whether I want to believe your story or not. We'll see later on."

I turned my back on her again and stepped to the door. The rising sun was topping the scrub-oak ridges to the east. The Breed was squatted against a hitching post, sucking a corn-husk cigarette. Back under the liveoaks, old Trapper Traywick sat on the edge of his gallery and whittled. The pile of shavings littering the gallery floor and the yard below made me wonder if the old jasper had sat and whittled all night long. A buffalo gun the size of a crowbar lay on the gallery beside him.

Up out of the brush welled the lonesome howl of a prairie wolf. I heard Soft Sally gasp behind me.

"What's that?" she wanted to know.

"That's the call of the great gray wolf," I said bitterly. "El Lobo. Him and the main bunch robbed the San Saba bank last night. Then they took over the Bob French ranch for a place to hole up in as long as we're here."

"The Bob French ranch!" she exclaimed. "But what happened to French? What happened to his girl Rachel?"

"They killed French," I told her. "I don't know about the girl."

Soft Sally's face whitened. "Oh, God!" she said.

Into town came the frantic beat of the hoofs of a single horse. Soft Sally hurried back to the door and out. A lathered sorrel ran wildly toward the hitching post where the Breed squatted sucking his cigarette. Its rider was a girl. She rode in, lying low over the pommel, quivering the animal she rode.

She slid her horse to a stop, showering the Breed with dust and gravel. She swung to the ground. The Breed rose out of his squat and walked over to lean against the wall. The girl's face was flushed. Her eyes were brilliant with fear and hate. Her breath came too fast.

"Come inside, Rachel," Soft Sally said. "Don't just stand there."

"They shot my father!" the girl said. "They killed him in cold blood!" Her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

El Lobo and the boys, it seems, had found the man reading a book; they immediately took him out in the yard and shot him to death.

"Come inside, Rachel," Soft Sally repeated urgently.

CHAPTER THREE

Strange Partner

THE girl ran in through the door then. She shot a half-expectant look at us, as if she were begging for help and knew she'd come too late.

"Why did they kill him?" she asked. And at last the tears began to fall. She wept silently, as though she were unconscious of the tears streaming down her face.

I said, "We'd better get her the hell out of here!"

She looked up with a challenge.

"Why?" she wanted to know. Her eyes were wide.

"You can't stay here," I said. "How did you get away?"

"I came out through the cellar," she said. "I heard them shoot my father and I ran down into the cellar and then slipped out. What did they kill him for? Some sneaking devil robbed him here in town first, then later they killed him!"

I said, "She's not safe here!"

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because they'll be here any minute," I said.

"What difference does it make? Let them come. The murderers!"

"Eet ees best that you go weeth the Señor Charlee, señorifa," the Breed put in.

He bowed half way to the floor and cracked his ugly face in that ungodly grin.

It was enough to make the girl scream. She didn't. She merely asked, "Where will I go?"

"Trapper Traywick'll take her in," Soft Sally said quickly. "That's him whittling there on the front gallery of that log shack. You tell him I said to take her in and hide her!"

A rising sun glinted on the pink dome of Trapper Traywick's head. A gentle breeze tugged at his whiskers. The buffalo gun lay across his lap now. He stopped whittling and stared at us with his watery old eyes, without recognition or greeting.

"Look, Grandpa," I said. "The girl's got to stay here."

He kept staring and said nothing.

"Soft Sally said so," I said. "She said to keep this girl hidden."

Trapper Traywick stabbed suddenly at the air over his shoulder with the point of his whittling knife. He said, "Put her in thar. In the sheriff's room."

We stepped into the first room, then into the next. There was a bed, a chair, and a table with a water pitcher on it. Through the window I could see a new grave in the yard. Its marker was new, made of soft pine, the most intricately carved marker a man ever saw. I knew then that I had guessed right. Trapper Traywick had sat up and whittled all night.

"You see that marker?" I said to the girl, pointing.

She nodded.

"That," I said, "is all a man can look forward to when he bucks El Lobo."

She looked up at me. She didn't get it. "Who are you?"

"I'm Charlie Lasater," I said.

She said, "You're kind. I thank you."

"You wouldn't if you knew," I said.

She looked at me strangely. "Knew what?"

"Knew that I'm the sneaking devil that robbed your father here in town last night," I said.

Then I turned and went out the door before I had to look at what that did to her. . . .

Soft Sally was pouring the Breed a drink when I stepped back into the saloon. The Breed bowed grandly and smiled at her as he accepted the liquor.

"Breed," I said to him flatly, "one word out of you about what's just happened and I'll cut your throat from ear to ear, with your own knife. You understand?"

"*Bueno*," said the Breed. "Have a drenk, no? Maybeso we go find many frans. Fine frans. Maybeso help. *Quien sabe?*"

I looked at him, trying to make him out. You could sort of read the brands on the rest of El Lobo's bunch. But the Breed had me buffaloed. He kept talking to me about certain, mysterious friends he had. Friends that could help us. But help us do what? He never would say. And he never told another member of El Lobo's pack about his friends. I could cuss him, treat him like a dog, but the only reaction

I ever got was that informal grin and that grand bow and an ever-ready "*Si, señor!*" But he wasn't afraid of me. He wasn't afraid of any man. You could see that in every move he made, every word he spoke. That half-Mex, half-Indian renegade never saw a booger in his life.

I recalled now the day I'd met him. It was the day that I shot Jess Skull. I shot Jess for a dirty-mouthed dog. I shot him because he'd killed my father, Jim Lasater. I left him wallowing and pitching in his own blood up there in his Clear Creek cabin and rode down to Fort McKavitt for a drink to get the killing off my mind.

There's where I ran into the Breed. Or, rather, he ran into me. He came staggering out of a saloon and nearly knocked me off the steps.

"Pardon, señor!" he said, bowing low and grandly. "Come have wan drenk weeth me, *por favor!*"

I had the drink with him and another and we talked and I told him I'd just killed a man.

"That ees notheeng, *amigo!*" the Breed said. "I seek wan man to keel, but I do not know thees man's name. Come weeth me. We ride in the pack of El Lobo. Maybeso, I keel me wan man sometime, then we ride south. The Breed, he have many frans there, fine frans."

Riding with El Lobo was as good as any. I'd killed a man. I was on the dodge. And if my first saddlemate had to be a big ugly cross between a Mexican and an Indian, what the hell?

So I rode with El Lobo, and the Breed was my saddlemate. And if he wanted to talk about his good friends across the Rio, let him talk.

But sometimes I couldn't help wondering about the Breed.



THE pack rode into town, El Lobo riding in the lead astride the big gray stud with the Roman nose. Riding with those clabber-milk eyes half-veiled, standing in a long stirrup, half out of the saddle. Riding with the sun glinting on the silver conchas of his bearskin leggin's and the chased gold butt of his heavy gun.

They pulled up in front of Soft Sally's.

Hatchet-faced Pearl Daggett, wanted on both sides of the Rio. Long Knife Jackson, a rotten-tooth killer with an eternal craving for rot-gut booze and a passion for using that long-bladed knife he called Old Butch.

There was Anton Supak, the big blank-eyed Bohemian sailor who'd been shipwrecked and washed ashore on the lonely sands of Padre Island. He'd walked sixty miles up the beach to murder an island rancher at Port Aransas and escape to the Texas mainland, riding a stolen horse. There were the three Solomon brothers, Lee, Daker, and Duke, sneaking, dirty, shifty-eyed little killers, fast with their guns and greedy as half-starved dogs. They made a great show of concealing the fact that they still had time to serve in Yuma for horse-stealing, but nobody gave a damn if they did.

And there was Gus Gildea, the lone survivor of the old Haggerty gang. A long, gangling, nasty-minded long-rider who told filthy jokes with a sneering laugh and made it a point to hate the guts of every man in the pack, especially mine.

The rest were mostly Border scum El Lobo had picked up here and there, or drifting, no-account cowpokes, down on their luck. All were bad. Some were hell on earth.

They dismounted and waited until El Lobo headed for the door of Soft Sally's, then followed. All but three who stood guard with Winchesters in the crooks of their arms.

El Lobo's milky eyes ran over the three of us, Soft Sally, the Breed, and I.

"Where's the girl?" he asked.

"Where's who?" I showed surprise.

El Lobo's eyes narrowed. He jerked a thumb back over his shoulder.

"That sorrel out yonder. He's wearing the French iron. Who rode him in?"

We'd forgotten to hide Rachel French's horse.

I looked at the Breed. He grinned his grin.

"But I ride heem een, Señor Lobo!" the Breed said. "Thees horse, I trade for!"

El Lobo snorted. "You lyin' devil!" he said. "You never traded for a horse in your life. Not when the owner was around!"

The Breed's grin broadened. "Maybe thees owner, he come back some day and I geeve heem a horse for thees wan."

"Or pay him off with lead," said El Lobo.

"No can tell!" shrugged the Breed.

El Lobo let it go at that. I wanted to go shake the hand of that grinning Breed.

"How was the San Saba job?" I asked El Lobo, hoping to keep his mind off the girl.

"Like they always go," he bragged.

"Lose anybody?" I asked.

"Heaslip," he said indifferently. "Damn fool clerk killed him with a pea-shooter gun. I blowed his face off for his trouble."

El Lobo walked to the bar and called for whiskey. Soft Sally set him out a bottle and a glass. He shoved the glass contemptuously off the bar and up-ended the bottle. Raw, liquor rattled down his throat. Then he rested his elbows on the bar and stared at Soft Sally.

"Remember me, Sally?" he asked.

She looked at him and shook her head.

"Remember Fort McKavitt?" he asked.

I could see what was coming and moved around behind the bar on the pretense of picking out a special bottle of liquor. The bottle was just the other side of Soft Sally.

"Yes," answered Soft Sally. "I remember Fort McKavitt. What about it?"

"You saw me there once," El Lobo said. "But it wasn't the last time you were there."

CHAPTER FOUR

Power of the Great Gray Wolf

I COULD see Soft Sally trembling and rage cut through me with blinding swiftness. I could pick at Sally. I could hurt her all I pleased. I had the right. But no other man had that right! "When do you mean? The last time?" Soft Sally asked.

"About three months ago," El Lobo said. "When Jess Skull got killed."

I was standing behind Soft Sally and could see the blood drain out of her neck. "I wasn't there three months ago," she said.

El Lobo's milky eyes were boring through her.

(Continued on page 100)

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(Continued from page 98)

"Sure?" he asked.

"I'm sure," she said.

El Lobo rolled a cigarette and kept staring at her.

"Another drink?" Soft Sally asked.

"Don't care if I do."

I stood there and watched her pour out his drink into a glass. El Lobo wouldn't drink out of a glass, but she couldn't know that. Suddenly, I felt sorry for her, and I knew I'd been wrong. Partly wrong, at least. Maybe she hadn't done what was best. But I was willing to bet she had done what she thought was best. And had had the nerve to try seeing it through.

El Lobo picked up the glass of whiskey, threw back his head as if to toss it off, then flung the contents into Soft Sally's white face.

My gun was in my hand before I knew it. But Soft Sally's hand was clutching it, showing it down behind the bar where El Lobo couldn't see.

"For God's sake, don't!" she said and wiped the whiskey out of her face with the other hand.

Nobody knew why she said that. Nobody but me—and the grinning Breed. The Breed was standing at the end of the bar and he could see her holding my gun and hand.

There were green lights glittering in El Lobo's milky eyes now.

"You ain't been to Fort McKavitt lately," he charged. "You don't know my face. I don't reckon you even remember my brother, Jess Skull. You just lived with him a while, then tried to kill him and run off. You shot him once and I think you shot him again. I got there just after he was shot, Sally. Jess tried to talk before he went out. He couldn't make it. But he did make me understand one word. I heard him say 'Lasater!'"

He broke off talking for a minute, but kept holding her eyes with his.

"If I was to kill you, Sally Lasater," he said, "it wouldn't be the first woman I ever killed. I shot a damn greaser woman once. A crazy witch of a fortune teller. She didn't tell my fortune to suit me, see! She said I'd die from the howl of a loafer wolf. It made me mad, so I shot her. And I've lived like a wolf ever since, just to

prove that she lied, damn her to hell!"

"She lied like you're lying, Sally. No man killed Brother Jess. No man was fast enough on the draw. A woman got him. A woman he'd let crawl in bed with him and catch him when he wasn't looking."

He grabbed her left arm suddenly, twisting it cruelly down on the bar, wrenching it till the whites of her eyes showed. But she still kept that grip on my gun and hand. She held that grip so tightly that her nails bit into my flesh.

"I didn't do it!" she screamed. "I tell you I didn't do it!"

A dead silence filled the room. There wasn't a puff from a cigarette, nor a sip of a drink. The Breed had moved down the bar, his black eyes glittering. And for once that sickly grin was wiped off his face.

"Turn me loose!" Soft Sally cried. "You're breaking my arm!"

El Lobo released his grip, still staring at her. Soft Sally staggered away from the bar, holding her arm in one hand. Perspiration stood out on her forehead and her mouth trembled.

"I'll kill you some day, Sally!" said El Lobo. "Hand me a new bottle of Hill and Hill and keep them damn glasses off the bar!"

Soft Sally rubbed her arm, a look of agonized pain still in her soft blue eyes. She set out a new bottle.

Crouched and hard-eyed men resumed their drinking. In the liveoaks over old Trapper Traywick's log cabin a fool mockingbird commenced singing in the sunlight. I said to the Breed, "Have a drink, Breed!"

"They'd have killed you, son!" Soft Sally whispered, when she got a chance.

"Maybe," I said.

"Maybeso, yes!" said the Breed, and he took another drink.

◆ ◆ ◆

THEY hung around Soft Sally's, drinking and gambling, till nearly sundown. All the time I could feel the eyes of Gus Gildea, El Lobo's *segundo*, following me. I knew what was on his filthy mind. He thought I knew where the girl was. He thought that I'd give myself

(Continued on page 102)

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 100)

away somehow and he'd catch on to where she was. Gus hated my guts more than the others, for no reason that I knew, and if I had a girl hidden out somewhere, he aimed to find her.

I drank with the pack. I cut high cards to take part in the raid on Llano the next day. I kept my mouth shut about Rachel French. And when they left, headed for the French ranch headquarters, I left with them. But I lost myself on the trail out and dropped back into town. I found Soft Sally pouring the Breed another drink.

"Breed," I said grimly, "I thought I saw you leave."

He shrugged—and grinned. "Maybe-so," he said.

I looked at Soft Sally. And the light that shone in her eyes made me want to sit down and cry like I used to do when I was a kid. I forgot the Breed.

"Any trouble over yonder?" I asked.

"No," she said. "But Rachel wants to see you."

"How come?" I asked.

"Lonesome, I guess," Soft Sally said. "You go see her, son."

I went. Old Trapper Traywick still sat on his front gallery with his old buffalo gun across his spindly legs. He didn't look up from his whittling. I glanced up and down the street, then stepped quickly inside.

Rachel French was awake. "I thought that would be you," she said.

"How come?" I asked, studying her.

"I don't know. I just hoped you'd come!"

You could tell that grief and lonesomeness were gnawing at her. But she was calm.

"Soft Sally's been talking to you," I said.

"Yes," said Rachel. "Does that matter?"

"No," I said.

I sat down and wished I knew what else to say.

"You know, I was afraid of you at first," she said finally.

She was a mighty little thing for a man to be afraid of, but I said, "I reckon I'm still sort of afraid of you."

Her eyes widened a bit and she almost

EL LOBO TAKES A TOWN

smiled. "Why should you be afraid of me?" she wanted to know.

"I don't know," I said. "I can't figure it out, either."

We talked for a long time, until after dark. She told me a lot of things about herself. I wanted to tell her some things about me, too, but I didn't. I just sat there and listened.

After a while, I said, "We've got to get you out of here soon. But I don't know just how to do it."

"I like you," she said, and suddenly walked up and kissed me.

I hurried out then, shaking like a man with chills and fever.

A dark figure squatted in front of the horses at the hitch-rail in front of Soft Sally's Saloon when I got there. A cigarette glowed and the scent of corn husk blended with that of tobacco.

"That you, Breed?" I called.

"Si, señor!"

"How come you haven't already gone?" I asked suspiciously.

"I wait, señor," he said, rising. "Thees señorita. She ees *muy bonita*, no?"

"She's pretty as a New Year's calendar," I admitted. "But what the hell's that got to do with your hanging around here?"

I was close enough now to see his confounded grin, even in the darkness.

"*Quien sabe*, señor?" he dodged. "We ride now?"

We rode out to the French ranch. Gus Gildea met us at the corrals.

"You've been to see that girl," he accused flatly.

Sudden, savage anger flared in me. I stepped down and shifted my gun into place.

"I can't see where that's any hide off your tail, Gus," I said.

Gus took a few steps forward. When he stopped, I could have almost reached out and touched him. I could see the plastered grin on his face and his shoe-button, evil eyes.

"I don't like you, Charlie Little," he said. "There's something sneaking about you that gets under my hide. I think I'm going to kill you for trying to hold out that girl on us!"

His hand dipped down. I shot him in

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

the belly, then shot him in the face before he could fall.

◆ ◆ ◆

THERE was a cut-bank gully just back of the barn. The Breed helped me and we dragged Gus Gildea's body to the gully and rolled it in. Then we kicked at the bank till part of it sluffed off and fell, covering his body. A good enough burial for his kind.

"That was fast shooting, Little," said the voice of El Lobo behind me.

My heart stumbled and wallowed, then picked up speed again.

"Fast enough," I said, speaking as casually as I could.

"Fastest I ever saw," said El Lobo. "Unless maybe Brother Jess was faster. Where did you learn shooting like that?"

"Just picked it up," I said. "With a little help from certain parties."

"It wouldn't have been a woman's help, would it," he asked. "Nancy Dyatt's, for instance?"

The anger that Gus Gildea had stirred in me was still there. I didn't give a damn any more.

"It might have been Nancy," I said. "Nancy was handy with a gun."

I couldn't quite see his clabber-milk eyes, but I could feel the force of them on me.

"And your name wouldn't happen to be Lasater, would it? Charlie Lasater?"

"It would," I said grimly. "And I killed your brother Jess Skull. He had his chance, but he was too slow. If you think you're faster, cut loose your wolf!"

It was a long time before El Lobo answered. Then he said, "Maybe Jess had it coming to him."

"Could be," I said, but somehow I didn't feel that I'd bluffed out the big man.

"We're busting the Llano bank tomorrow," said El Lobo, switching subjects with baffling speed. "You're riding with me, Charlie Lasater. You'll meet me at Soft Sally's Saloon in the morning and make my last ride with me."

He turned and strode toward the big ranchhouse looming in the darkness. A minute later I heard the creak of saddle

leather, then the pounding of the big gray stud's hoofs, heading for town. . . .

The Breed moved in out of the corral shadows. I hadn't seen him step into them. But there he was now, with a gun in his hand. He must have had somebody covered while I talked with El Lobo. Why should he be backing me against the outlaw chief? Or was he? You couldn't tell about the Breed. Whatever his game, he played his cards close to his vest.

The Breed didn't ride into town with me the next morning. He'd bedded down with me in one of the ranch bunkhouses. But when I awoke from a short and troubled nap, he was gone.

I rode into town cautiously. There was a good chance that Fredonia would be crowded this morning. There'd been rumors of two parties of John Laws cold-trailing El Lobo and his pack. And since we'd hit Fredonia, nobody had gone to any trouble to keep our presence a secret. Every citizen in the country had come to realize what had happened. Gangs like this of El Lobo's weren't exactly a new thing in these parts. There was a Mexican renegade by the name of El Paisano who'd been known to work this far north of the Border.

A strange bird, that Paisano. One place he was robbing and killing. The next time he was heard of, likely as not he was pulling some poor devil out of a tight and giving him a lift. That is, if a man could believe the rustling of the leaves along the owlhoot trail. And the leaves come mighty close to the truth most of the time.

I hated to go into the saloon that morning. I wasn't right sure that I'd ever come out alive if I did. There's been something mighty strange about the way El Lobo had acted the night before. He'd passed off the killing of his brother too lightly. And that talk about this being his last ride. . . .

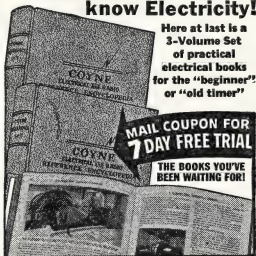
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SOFT SALLY glanced up with a worried look when I stepped inside. El Lobo was at the bar, drinking. There was something wrong about the way he drank. Then I saw what it was—he was drinking liquor out of a glass!

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

The rest of the pack was milling around inside, but they didn't seem to notice that El Lobo was drinking liquor out of a glass instead of a bottle. Or if they did, they seemed to think nothing of it. But it gave me a queer feeling inside.

"Here comes Little," said Pearl Dagget. "But where's Gus Gildea? And that filthy Breed?"

My belly muscles tightened. Hadn't El Lobo told them about my killing Gus Gildea the night before? And where was the Breed? He'd drawn a low card and was due to make this ride to Llano.

El Lobo looked up at Dagget's words. "Where's that girl, Little?" he demanded. "Why should I know where she is?"

I countered.

The light flared suddenly in his eyes and I thought he was about to force the play at last. Then a look of cautious cunning came into his face.

He said, "Reckon I've got plenty of time yet. No hurry. I need a good gun hand today. I'll need him bad. Today I aim to pay off an old debt. We'll knock over that bank, then I aim to get me a sheriff. The same sheriff that was in office sixteen year ago and horse-whipped me into remembering I shot that greaser wench that lied about my fortune. A sneaking law badge polisher that horse-whipped many a pore devil in his time. A low-bellied, rot-gutted snake that horse-whipped me till I couldn't talk and then throwed me in his stinking jail till I could!"

He slammed a heavy fist down on the mahogany.

"I'll show that lawman what it's like to be horse-whipped!" he thundered. "I'll cut piggins' strings out of his hide and then I'll scatter his brains till they can't be scraped up with a hoe!"

El Lobo was drunk. It showed in his flushed face. It showed in his eyes, a green, glittering, inhuman light shining through the clabber-milk white.

A blacksnake lay coiled on the bar beside him. He reached for it suddenly and flipped it high behind him. The crowd fell away from the bar. The whip licked forward with a thunderous crash and a whiskey glass exploded into a thousand flying fragments.

EL LOBO TAKES A TOWN

El Lobo cleaned the bar of every bottle and drinking glass, then turned.

"You know what happened to Gus Gildea?" he asked. "Little, here, shot him. Called Gus' hand and cold-out beat him to the draw. Shot him twice and Gus never busted a cap. Charlie Little's the fastest man with a gun you ever saw—except me. And he's riding to Llano with us today. We're needing a good gun slinger and Charlie Little's it. Fall onto them horses. We're ready to ride!"

We rode. I rode and wondered if the pack believed what El Lobo had told about my killing Gus Gildea. There was no way of telling, but I noticed that nobody rode beside me.

Suddenly, I felt lonesome for the Breed. A white man, lonesome for a cross between a bad Indian and a worse Mexican! But I missed the Breed now.

El Lobo howled his wolf howl before we rode into Llano. Then he drew his gun. So did the rest. We rode down the main street in broad, open daylight and people looked up at us, wondering, fearful, but not yet understanding what our coming meant.



THEN somewhere I heard the words "El Lobo" spoken. Instantly every man in town seemed to realize what was taking place. Faces stared at us from barber shops and pool rooms and general stores. Frightened faces.

We rode past the slab-rock jail and there was the Llano County Bank. El Lobo stopped in front of the bank. He swung down off his horse and Pearl Daggett and Long Knife Jackson swung down, too. They strode into the bank. The rest of us stepped quickly to the ground and waited, guns ready.

Down the street a couple of men ran from one side to the other. A wagon loaded with women and children pulled out of town on the run.

Inside the bank there was a single shot, loud in the hot silence. A moment later El Lobo stepped out with a bulging satchel in his hand. When he got to his horse, he didn't mount, however. He just handed the satchel to Pearl Daggett, then turned

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

and headed for the jail. The stock of the blacksnake whip was stuck under his belt and the long reach of braided rawhide trailed in the dust.

He hammered on the jail door with the butt of his gun and shouted, "Come on out, Sheriff, and take your whipping!"

It was a fool, rash stunt. They could have shot him in the back from half the windows in town. But they didn't, and I don't know to this day why they didn't. Unless the damn-you-to-hell gall of the man kept them paralyzed with awe.

There was no answer to El Lobo's knocking.

He tried the door latch. The door was locked. He stepped back quickly and fired three shots into the latch, then shoved the battered door open and stepped inside. A moment later he was back out in the street again, prodding a sag-bellied, white-faced, trembling wretch of a man with a star pinned on his vest.

"You can stop now, Everett!" commanded El Lobo.

The sheriff halted, blinking in the sunlight. El Lobo took his gun out of the man's back and slipped it into his holster. Then he reached for his whip stock and flung the blacksnake back of him.

"Remember me, Everett?" he asked. "I'm Lester Skull! Remember?"

The stricken sheriff stood there stupidly, with the slack of his pants seat sagging.

The blacksnake cut into that slack with the crashing report of a rifle. The man jumped and screamed and started to run. The blacksnake licked forward again and caught around his boot top. El Lobo gave a jerk and the man went down.

"Remember Lester Skull, Everett?" said El Lobo.

If the sheriff ever remembered, he never got a chance to say so. He never even got to his feet again. The blacksnake was suddenly a live, deadly thing in El Lobo's hands, cutting viciously at the man's head and shoulders. Raising dust and drawing blood every lick.

It was too cold-bloodily sickening to watch. I looked away and I didn't look up again until I heard El Lobo empty his gun into the man's body.

He came toward us then, unhurriedly, punching the empties out of his gun and

slipping new shells into the cylinder. Then he was mounting the big gray stud and leading us out of town on the run.

That's when they opened on us. A gun from every window and rooftop, it seemed like. From every alley and street intersection. There were even men lying on their bellies under the plank sidewalks and throwing a hail of lead into us.

Pearl Daggett's horse went down in front of me. My horse jumped the pile. But I saw the horror in Pearl Daggett's face as he lay on his back and looked up an instant before the horse I rode set a forefoot in his face. Anton Supak, the blank-eyed Bohemian, slid out of the saddle and his horse ran blindly through a plate-glass window. Other men and horses went down.

Then we were clear of town and thundering up the river road, with long-reaching lead whining past our ears like hornets and kicking up little puffs of dust in front of us. And I began to feel the sting of a wound across my arm and warm blood running down my shirtleeve. But it wasn't a bad one. Just a flesh wound.

CHAPTER FIVE

Showdown for El Lobo

SIXTEEN of us made that ride into Llano. Nine of us made it back to Soft Sally's Saloon at sundown. I could see the look of thankfulness in Soft Sally's eyes as I entered. Then I knew for sure that I'd been in the wrong about Soft Sally. *She loves me*, I thought. *She's always loved her son!*

She saw the blood on my sleeve and hurried around the end of the bar, ignoring El Lobo's call for whiskey.

"Is it bad, Charlie?" she asked, with a look of deep concern in her blue eyes.

I lifted the wounded arm and patted her on the shoulder. "Just a scratch, Mother," I said.

Soft Sally broke down and cried then. I wanted to cry with her. But that's when El Lobo put down a bottle he'd picked up off the bar and said, "I've found the girl, Little. I saw you look at old Trapper Traywick's shack as we rode out and then look at it again as we rode in. I'm going to get her now."

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He leered at me, then turned around and strode out the door. I ran for the back, went up the alley as fast as I could run, and came in from the back of Trapper Traywick's cabin. I ran through the old man's room and stopped in the door, looking out on the gallery. The old man sat there in his rocking chair, whittling away. El Lobo was coming up the path. The rest of the pack was filing out of Soft Sally's Saloon, ready to watch the show.

El Lobo looked up and saw me in the door and a contemptuous smile parted his thin lips.

"Get out of that door, Charlie Lasater," he said.

I pulled my gun. "You step on this gallery, Lester Skull," I said, "and I'll show you how Jess got it."

He kept coming. "You ain't got the guts to shoot, Lasater," he said. "There's too many of us. Somebody'd get you where it hurts."

"But I'll get you and another one or two first," I said.

That fool mocking bird started singing in the top of a liveoak overhead.

The door of the saloon burst open. Soft Sally rushed through, a gun in each hand.

"And I'll get some more," she said.

El Lobo turned. He looked at Soft Sally, then back at me. Then he walked slowly back down the path toward the saloon. He walked past his men and said something I couldn't hear. They crowded around him. He walked on toward Soft Sally and halted, facing her guns.

"You still pack a gun, do you sister?" he asked.

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EL LOBO TAKES A TOWN

"And I can still shoot one!" she said. He stepped toward her again. Soft Sally backed a step. I saw his game, and I hollered at Soft Sally to shoot. I couldn't shoot, for fear of hitting her.

But I was too late. El Lobo made a sudden movement. Soft Sally fired. But she'd missed. Another man took her lead in the leg and cursed. Then El Lobo had her, was tearing her guns out of her hands and dragging her back into the interior of the saloon.

I started off the gallery. Trapper Traywick said, "Thar's riders coming!"

The unexpectedness of his voice halted me. I wheeled. I didn't quite know what to do. I could go into that saloon and get killed, but that wouldn't keep them from getting Soft Sally first, if they really aimed to.

"Where's the girl?" I suddenly asked the whiskery old jasper. "Where's Rachel French?"

"Gone," said the old man.

"Gone where?" I asked in sudden apprehension.

"With that Breed," he said. "Come and taken her away last night."

Cold, numbing fear shot through me. "Oh, God!" I gasped. "That dirty, stinking damn Breed. And I was about to trust him!"

I stood there for what seemed hours, unable to move or think. Dumbfounded, I stood there and watched old Trapper Traywick carefully lay down his stick of soft pine, slip his whittling knife into his scabbard, and reach for the old rusty-barreled buffalo gun lying on the floor beside him.

"Thar's riders comin'," he said again, and got up.

My senses came back to me. He was right. There were riders coming. Dozens of them. Riding in slowly out of the dusk. Sitting straight in their high saddles. Wearing braided charro suits and big, high-peaked, roll-brimmed sombreros. One in this street. Two in that one. A rider or more in every street and every rider headed toward the center of town, headed toward Soft Sally's Saloon.

"What the hell?" I exclaimed and stepped out among the liveoaks in the yard to watch.



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ONE of the approaching horses nickered. Three of the mounts tied at the hitch rail answered. The batwing doors flew open and out came El Lobo, his head high and his gold-buffed gun in his hand.

From behind me lifted the wail of the gray prairie wolf, long, lonesome, and blood-chilling. I whirled, and ducked just in time. Behind me stood old Trapper Traywick with his buffalo gun braced against a gallery post and sighting over my head.

The old gun exploded with a sheet of flame and a report like a charge of dynamite. Its recoil staggered the gray-haired old jasper. I looked to see his target. El Lobo, the great gray wolf, lay wallowing in the dust in front of Soft Sally's Saloon.

"Like shootin' buffer, by gum!" said old Trapper Traywick behind me.

The shot had brought three men running to the door. They saw the riders approaching and turned back. Gunfire crashed in the streets. The three made it back through the door, but they stopped there, flat on their faces on the floor and full of lead.

There were startled exclamations inside the saloon, then a sudden burst of men out into the alley behind. Guns opened on them there, too. They tried to back up and return the fire. But one after another they went down. And the riders kept coming on. Mexican riders. And their aim was deadly.

They circled the saloon. A gun opened from a window. A veritable hail of lead from the outside silenced it almost before it had started.

Then the Mexicans were dismounting in front and behind the saloon and shoving through the doors.

Old Trapper Traywick came up beside me, the weight of his old gun pulling his scrawny body sideways.

"The Breed!" he said. "Knowned his pappy. Big hombre what used to skin for me in buffer-huntin' days. Hell with the wimmin, that gent was. Mex, Injun, or black."

He headed for the saloon, as if he knew what it was all about. I followed. Two riders had turned away from the door and were coming out to met us. I

EL LOBO TAKES A TOWN

recognized them then, the Breed and Rachel French.

They halted before us. Rachel French gave a glad cry and flung herself out of the saddle. She grasped my wounded arm and stood laughing and crying and gripping the wound tighter. The Breed sat there on his horse, that damned infernal grin of his splitting his face.

"Like shootin' buffer, by gum!" said old Trapper Traywick again. "Howl like a loafer wolf to make 'em throw up their heads and stand. Then hand it to 'em. I've made kills at a thousand yards in my time. Reckon I could a-done 'er agin."

Soft Sally came running out of the saloon to join us. She swung to my other arm. She wasn't laughing and she wasn't crying. She was just saying over and over, "Charlie, my boy!"

I said to the Breed, "Breed, you're a white man!"

The Breed bowed grandly, but shook his head. "No, señor. Me, I am wan breed."

"All right, Breed," I said. "Get down. I want to shake your hand!"

He spread that ungodly grin again and got down. He bowed over our handshake like he was shaking hands with the President.

He said, "El Paisano ees glad and honored to shook the hand of hees fran, Charlee Lasater. May the señor find many happiness weeth the two women he loves most!"

"So you're El Paisano," I said. "This sounds like what I've heard of you. And I'm ready to hand back the same amount you give. Here's hoping you find what you're looking for, El Paisano."

He shrugged. "It has been found, my fran," he said. "It was El Lobo, the dog who keel my mama. I hunt heem many years. But when he ees found, the fran of my father has keel heem. Bueno! We go now."

And with another grand, grinning bow, he mounted and rode out of town.

We stood and watched them go. But old Trapper Traywick paid them no attention. He just went back and sat down on the gallery and started rocking and whittling again. And the light of the rising quarter moon shone on his bald head.

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